The New Criterion

December 1994

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Volume 13, Number 4, $4.75

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Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. December 1994, Volume 13, Number 4. Subscriptions: $36 for one year, $65 for two. Outside the United States, add $7 per year. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send changes of address to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. Copyright © 1994 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 2020 Superior Street, Sandusky, OH 44870. (800) 221-3148. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date.

Advertising: Galleries & fine arts: Fred Stern, 44 Paulin Boulevard, Leonia, NJ 07605. (201) 947-2674.
Publishers & others: Richard A. Vaughan/Ann Moreland, 129 Phelps Avenue, Rockford, IL 61108. (815) 398-8569.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set in 10-point Galliard and is printed by Science Press in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, USA.

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Notes & Comments: December 1994

Professor Nussbaum on patriotism & moral goodness

One curious and disturbing feature of elite liberal culture today is the persistence of a debility we might call Chronic Intellectual Adolescence. The narcissism and naïveté of adolescence, its implacable though ill-informed moralism, its smug grandiosity and political silliness: all are thriving in the work of many prominent figures who, chronologically, left the heady years of their teens behind long ago. We had reason to reflect on this phenomenon recently when the October/November issue of *Boston Review* crossed our desk. This special issue of the bi-monthly "alternative" paper is devoted largely to a debate about education and political identity. Entitled "Patriotism or Cosmopolitanism?" the exchange opens with an essay by Martha C. Nussbaum, the well-known feminist professor of philosophy, classics, and comparative literature at Brown University who is also a member of *Boston Review*'s editorial board. Professor Nussbaum's essay, which comes down firmly on the side of cosmopolitanism and against patriotism, is followed by twenty-nine brief responses from a politically diverse group of prominent intellectuals including Hilary Putnam, Nathan Glazer, Harvey Mansfield, Benjamin R. Barber, Richard Sennett, Michael Lerner, Sheldon Hackney, Judith Butler, Leo Marx, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. These responses, which range from enthusiastic endorsements to stinging repudiations of Professor Nussbaum's argument, are in turn followed by her rejoinder. A future issue of *Boston Review* will carry additional responses.

It is a remarkable performance, by turns intellectually formidable and jejune. The essence of the jejune quality is first hinted at in the editor's note, which suggests that earlier debates about "education and political identity" were deficient because "both sides assumed a primary commitment to a group smaller than humanity." Yes, we stopped short, too: after all, what could it mean to have a "primary commitment" to "humanity"? We know what it means to have commitments to family, friends, to particular institutions, ideas, and nations. But *humanity*? Can one really be said to have "primary commitment" to something so vague and abstract? The editor of *Boston Review* clearly hopes so, and he has enlisted Martha Nussbaum to argue the case.

Professor Nussbaum's essay, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," includes many references to Stoic philosophy and other learned sources. But her main point is a familiar variation on an old utopian idea. She seems to think it a pity that mankind

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should have arranged itself into peoples and nations because such divisions have tended to hinder the recognition of our common humanity and "the substantive universal values of justice and right." Thus she urges her readers to abandon patriotism for the ideal of "world citizenship." Like many utopian ideas, Professor Nussbaum's nostrums can sound marvelous when stated abstractly. We are certainly all for recognizing our common humanity and "the substantive universal values of justice and right." As antidotes to the ethnic particularism advocated by radical multiculturalism, such ideals may seem to have much to recommend them. But what, really, do they mean? The answer depends very much on the political vision that informs them. Reading Professor Nussbaum's essay, it soon becomes clear that, in her hands, such ideas are primarily weapons in an ideological battle—a battle whose agenda was set by the political radicalism of the 1960s.

Professor Nussbaum is suspicious of rampant nationalism. Well, so are we all. But she early on says that Americans have frequently given "the fact of being American a special salience in moral and political deliberation," as if vicious and exclusionary nationalism have been special problems in America. The truth is, of course, that—until recently, anyway—American society has been a great model of how to foster a healthy patriotism without ideological nationalism. Professor Nussbaum finds patriotism "morally dangerous" and recommends instead "the old ideal of the cosmopolitan, the person whose primary allegiance is to the community of human beings in the entire world." What sort of "allegiance" would that be? What sort of "community" do human beings *tout court* make up? Quoting Diogenes, she looks forward to the "world citizen." But what can that mean? Our dictionary defines "citizen," first of all, as "a person owing loyalty to and entitled by birth or naturalization to the protection of a given state." A *given* state, mind you. By forcing together the words "world" and "citizen," Professor Nussbaum would have us believe she has created a vital new category; in fact, she has merely conjured up a conceptual centaur, a philosophical freak.

Something similar is going on in Professor Nussbaum's idea of politics. Hitherto, she notes, we have been used to distinguishing between "a politics based on ethnic and racial and religious difference and a politics based on shared national identity." For Professor Nussbaum, such thinking is not grand or ambitious enough: "What we share as both rational and mutually dependent human beings was simply not on the agenda." Again, it sounds splendid. Who wants to speak against "what we share as both rational and mutually dependent human beings"? But where do politics come into the equation? As Professor Nussbaum must know, politics means first of all that which has to do with the *polis*, the city, a particular place that exacts particular duties and confers specific privileges. One recalls Hannah Arendt's observation, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, that "The Rights of Man, supposedly inalienable, proved to be unenforceable . . . whenever people appeared who were no longer citizens of any sovereign state." Professor Nussbaum quotes Seneca praising the idea of a human world not confined by national boundaries and says that "it is this community that is, most fundamentally, the source of our moral obligations." But to speak of this global abstraction is to use "community" in a decidedly Pickwickian sense. Professor Nussbaum wishes us to "give our allegiance to what is morally good—and that which, being good, I can commend to all human beings." A noble sentiment, but one that is basically religious or philosophical, not political—though, to be sure, it can be used for political purposes.

Professor Nussbaum addresses us from a lofty philosophical plane. But her proposals,

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as she acknowledges, would entail "large-scale economic and political consequences" of a very concrete nature. We get a hint of the kind of politics she has in mind when she assures us that "our nation is appallingly ignorant of most of the rest of the world" (unlike the rest of the world, we wondered?) and that a study of family life elsewhere "can show us, for example, that the two-parent nuclear family, in which the mother is the primary homemaker and the father the primary bread-winner, is by no means a pervasive style of child-rearing in today's world." So, on the one hand, we "should recognize humanity wherever it occurs, and give its fundamental ingredients, reason and moral capacity, our first allegiance and respect." But, on the other, we should act to promote the agenda of late-twentieth-century feminism as it exists in affluent American universities.

There is a distinct aroma of Chronic Intellectual Adolescence pervading Professor Nussbaum's entire essay. But it is especially noticeable in her peroration, which also gives us a sense of the moral tenor of her cosmopolitan ideal. Speaking in glowing terms of how her ideas might influence "the formation of public policy," she concludes with the story of the courtship and marriage of "the Cynic cosmopolitan philosophers Crates and Hipparchia" from Diogenes Laertius. She quotes a lengthy snippet in which the happy couple are finally united and set out on life together: "Adopting the same clothing and style of life [Hipparchia] went around with her husband and they copulated in public and went off together to dinner parties." Professor Nussbaum hastens to tells us she is "not exactly recommending Crates and Hipparchia as the marital ideal for students in my hypothetical cosmopolitan schools." Which leads us to ask, exactly what is she recommending?

Among the many responses to Professor Nussbaum's proposals, the response of the Harvard political scientist Harvey Mansfield deserves special mention. Professor Nussbaum insists that "the accident of where one is born is just that, an accident," and therefore one's allegiance to one's native country must not trump one's allegiance to "humanity." But as Professor Mansfield observes, while it is an accident that we are born in one place rather than another, it is not an accident that we are born in a *particular* place. Hence he argues that the most effective cure for "noxious patriotism" is "not cosmopolitanism but democratic government." Why, he wonders, does Professor Nussbaum "ignore the liberalism and the constitutionalism of the country in which she lives?" She touts the Stoic ideal of cosmopolitanism, but that ideal was not "intended as the basis of politics. It didn't care about global hunger, ecology, women's liberation, abortion, or any other of Professor Nussbaum's causes."

In her rejoinder, Professor Nussbaum contemptuously dismisses Professor Mansfield's criticisms. But two things are particularly noteworthy in his response. The first is his invocation of the liberalism and constitutionalism of the Founders: why does Professor Nussbaum pass over in silence that fertile and beneficent political tradition, which is after all *her* tradition? And the second noteworthy thing in Professor Mansfield's response is his citation of Professor Nussbaum's political causes. Professor Nussbaum presents herself as proceeding on the high-minded plane of philosophical principle. She is interested in the "universal," in "what is morally good," "that which, being good, I can commend to all human beings." But in fact, she acts as a political partisan, and her lofty rhetoric is all in the service of a political program.

We were given a vivid glimpse of what this might mean in practical terms in the Fall 1994 issue of *Academic Questions*, a quarterly publication of the National Association of

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Scholars. In the lead essay, "'Shameless Acts' in Colorado: Abuse of Scholarship in Constitutional Cases," the Oxford legal philosopher John Finnis discusses several cases in which false testimony has been given in cases involving constitutional litigation. He devotes most of his long essay to Professor Nussbaum's sworn testimony in *Evans v. Romer*. In this case, which came before Denver District Court last year and is now on appeal, the plaintiffs (for whom Professor Nussbaum testified) sought to invalidate a Colorado state constitutional amendment that prohibited any official body in Colorado from adopting a law or policy that grants homosexuals "minority status, quota preferences, protected status or claim of discrimination." The state asked Professor Finnis to testify, *inter alia*, about "the political-philosophical arguments for a legal scheme such as Britain's or Colorado's, in which private homosexual acts between consenting adults are no crime but are discouraged by the law and public policy in other ways, and . . . about the rational moral basis for judging that such acts are bad for people and ought to be discouraged." His affidavit included a lengthy discussion of law and public policy in classical Athens, and "the positions of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle on the morality of homosexual and other non-marital sex acts."

In her sworn testimony, Professor Nussbaum asserted that in classical Greece "same-sex romantic relationships, attachments, and sexual conduct were highly regarded. . . . Such relationships were never considered shameful. . . . [P]rior to the Christian tradition, there is no evidence that the natural law theories regarded same-sex erotic attachments as immoral, 'unnatural,' or improper." Professor Nussbaum further testified that Professor Finnis was mistaken in holding the contrary and that he was "tripped up by things that are not in the Greek." Professor Finnis cited many passages from classical authors in his affidavit. The one passage that Professor Nussbaum focused on comes from section 636c of Plato's *Laws* in which Plato's spokesman (in the translation that Professor Finnis quotes) says that homosexual acts are "contrary to nature" (*para phusin*) and that "those first guilty of such enormities (*tolmêma*) were impelled by their slavery to pleasure."

Asked under cross examination whether there might be legitimate scholarly disagreement about this translation, Professor Nussbaum replied that while "there are some reasonable disagreements about meanings of words, . . . the issues that I've raised with Finnis are—they're not a disagreement. Those sentences just are not there in the Greek." According to Professor Nussbaum, *tolmêma* is morally neutral and so the passage "those guilty of such enormities" ought to be translated as "those who first ventured to do this." Professor Finnis acknowledges that this is indeed a possible translation of the passage in question, but notes that the issue is whether the common translation (Professor Finnis was quoting from the Loeb Classical Library translation) "*falsifies* or *substantially misrepresents*" the passage or the thought of Plato. Professor Nussbaum insists that it does. The word *tolmêma*, she testified, never conveys any "nuance of guilt." To support her case, she referred the court to "the following meanings in Liddle [*sic*], Scott, *Lexicon of the Ancient Greek Language* [*sic*], the authoritative dictionary relied on by all scholars in this area: 'an adventure, enterprise, deed of daring.'"

That might seem to clinch the case in Professor Nussbaum's favor. But if one turns to a current edition of Liddell and Scott's *A Greek–English Lexicon*, one will find the following definition for *tolmêma*: "*adventure, enterprise, daring* or *shameless act.*" What happened to "shameless act" in Professor Nussbaum's dictionary? Simple: she went back to the edition of 1897 (or perhaps an even earlier edition: it was first published in 1811) for her citation. The current edition of

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this standard reference work, revised under the direction of Henry Stuart Jones in the 1910s and 1920s, was completed in 1940; a 153-page Supplement, incorporating many corrections, was added in 1968; the work has been reprinted many times since. As Professor Finnis notes, once this edition was completed, "the old eighth edition of 1897 was of course abandoned by scholars as entirely superseded." Moreover, Professor Finnis points out, Professor Nussbaum's insistence that *tolmêma* and its cognates are always morally neutral and non-pejorative is "in substance a falsification *even of the 1897 edition entry* for *tolmêma*," as an example from Aristophanes that follows the definition she cites makes clear. In sum: The Liddell, Scott, Jones lexicon of 1940/1968 is indeed "the authoritative dictionary relied on by all scholars in this area." But the quotation Professor Nussbaum put before the court is from a dictionary that, in Professor Finnis's words, "is not authoritative or relied upon by all scholars, or indeed any scholars." Professor Nussbaum's own published works refer to the current edition of the lexicon regularly, though when questioned about this she asserted that "I use the edition without the supplementation by Jones." It is all the more curious, then, that while the version of her affidavit filed with the defendants refers to the "Liddle, Scott, & Jones" lexicon, the ampersand and the word "Jones" have been whited out in the version filed with the court.

All this may seem needlessly arcane, especially in a case that will naturally incite heated debate. But what Professor Finnis has laid bare in his meticulously detailed account is a pattern of misrepresentation on the part of Professor Nussbaum that amounts to a "wholesale abuse of her scholarly authority and attainments." Her fudging of the meaning of *tolmêma* is merely one of many such misrepresentations that Professor Finnis anatomizes. For example, in sworn testimony, Professor Nussbaum asserted that "the terms tendentiously translated 'according to nature' and 'unnatural' or 'contrary to nature' actually refer (in my own expert opinion and the consensus of recent scholars such as Price . . .) to 'birth' and not 'nature' in any normative moral sense." But in *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*, the work by Anthony Price to which she refers, the phrase *para phusin* is translated precisely as "unnatural." She claimed that the scholar Sir Kenneth Dover, author of *Greek Homosexuality*, supported her interpretation of Plato, but in fact Dover has confirmed in writing that "it is certainly my opinion that the Socrates of Plato and Xenophon condemned homsosexual copulation as such." She claimed that David Cohen, one scholar on whom Professor Finnis had relied in framing his affidavit, was unreliable on Greek philological matters because he "is not a classicist. He has never been employed by a department of Classics, and is not a member of the American Philological Association. . . . He is a Professor in a department of Rhetoric, with a degree in law." But according to Professor Finnis, Cohen studied both Greek and Sanskrit before taking a Ph.D. from Cambridge in classics; he holds a split professorship at the University of California at Berkeley in rhetoric and classics; and although he is not a member of the American Philological Association, he delivers papers at its meetings. These are facts that Professor Nussbaum must surely have known, since Professor Cohen recounted them to her personally in a conversation they had in 1992.

Professor Nussbaum grandly recommends that we follow the "morally good." But what conception of the good can she have when simple honesty is beyond her?

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At the Warhol Museum

by Hilton Kramer

When you think about it, department stores are kind of like museums.
—Andy Warhol

One's first impression of the Andy Warhol Museum is of a smart new specialty store—not exactly a department store, to be sure, but something on the scale of the old Henri Bendel's on West Fifty-seventh Street in Manhattan or the new Barneys on Madison Avenue, only in this case distinctly downmarket and featuring but one line of goods: the artist's reputation. In this respect, it also resembles some of the new-style emporiums that have lately opened around Fifth Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street in New York: the Warner Bros. and Coca-Cola shops that do a brisk business in brand-name nostalgia kitsch. It is indeed as if Warhol's comparison of art museums and department stores had been adopted, with appropriate modifications, as the guiding principle in planning this monument to his name and fame.

Yet this first impression, though never entirely eradicated, is soon diminished as one makes one's way through the seven stories of the building that houses the new museum. The institution that has been created to honor Warhol's memory in Pittsburgh, his hometown, is too sedate, even bleak, and at times too tedious to sustain comparison with the livelier world of retail commerce, however much we may be reminded of that world in what we see. Here, too, a species of brand-name nostalgia kitsch is encountered at every turn, but the atmosphere in which it is displayed is surprisingly dour and formal, as if a perpetual memorial service were in progress somewhere on the premises. On all but one floor of the museum there are stainless-steel wall plaques, on which are inscribed solemn accounts of the various stages of Warhol's career. These remind one of nothing so much as the inscribed lids that adorn Jenny Holzer's lugubrious funerary caskets—which further re-enforces the mortuary effect. Adding to this impression, too, are the display cases containing all sorts of personal memorabilia and flea-market trash—snapshots, publicity photos, theater programs, exhibition announcements, party invitations, handbills, ticket stubs, sales receipts, newspaper clippings, cookie jars, even items of clothing—which we are invited to ponder as sacred documents tracing the course of the great man's journey from his humble origins in Pittsburgh to his international stardom by way of the fashion, advertising, and art worlds of Manhattan.

There is, of course, something fundamentally ridiculous about this attempt to turn the life and work of Andy Warhol into objects of piety. To effect this change from the profane to the sacred in Warhol's status as a cultural icon, he has had to be made a lot more innocent, a lot more respectable, and a lot more boring and benign than he ever was in real life. The ruined, degraded lives he left in his wake; the corrupting influence he exerted on the sensibilities of his many

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admirers (not only the dealers, dopeheads, and feckless drifters who competed for a place in his entourage, but the professors and intellectuals who became in their own way equally abject Warhol groupies); the sheer moral squalor that was the underside of the deadpan facetiousness and commercial opportunism—the whole destructive side of Warhol's career has had to be discreetly shunted offstage in order to create a kind of shrine to St. Andy offering family entertainment to a celebrity-besotted public in a state of permanent adolescent arrest.

In the project that was undertaken in Pittsburgh to transform this prince of profanation into an object of cultural piety, the basic scenario called for a *mise en scène* so utterly immaculate and respectable that no suggestion of the sordid—which in Warhol's case could not, after all, be entirely avoided—would be seen as anything but marginal and amusing. Little trace of the Factory ethos or the Velvet Underground demi-monde would be permitted in this temple of reverence and propriety. If certain distasteful practices could not avoid mention, then the script required that they be assigned some allegedly exalted purpose—preferably religious or philosophical, never commercial or simply pernicious. Thus the practice of urinating onto prepared canvases for the production of the so-called *Oxidation* pictures, which are themselves little more than an impudent and failed parody of Jackson Pollock's "drip" paintings, is elevated by a museum wall text to the artistic equivalent of transubstantiation, one of the sacred doctrines of Roman Catholic faith—a gesture of insouciant blasphemy that is a perfect correlative of the mindset which has shaped the very conception of the museum itself. More generally, however, it is art, not religion, that is consistently blasphemed, subverted, and mocked in this woefully misguided museological travesty.

It has to be said that in the effort to transform the Warhol legacy into a source of civic pride and an image of high-minded cultural endeavor, the museum has been better served by its architect—Richard Gluckman—than by its curator or sponsors. Mr. Gluckman has done a superb job of redesigning the old Frick & Lindsay building, a warehouse built in 1911 and subsequently expanded, into a handsome, highly functional, and blessedly unpretentious contemporary museum structure. The exterior of the building has been expertly restored to a facsimile—as I suppose it must be called—of its original period style, while the interior has been brought into conformity with *our* period style of white-walled, unornamented exhibition spaces. The only eruption of ponderous artiness in the whole conception was the decision to paint the walls of the tunnel-like entrance space a midnight blue more appropriate to a Warholesque disco than to a contemporary art museum.

For the most part, however, Mr. Gluckman has given the Warhol Museum a building that is, if anything, too good for its purposes. For the aesthetic differences that separate the building from its contents have the effect of underscoring the essential vacuousness, cynicism, and silliness of Warhol's art. In this chaste setting, the Warhol *oeuvre* looks orphaned and becalmed, severed from the media-induced excitements and intellectual scandals it once ignited and now made to stand or fall on its own aesthetic merits. This is a test that Warhol simply cannot meet. Here the so-called box "sculptures"—copies of crates for commercial products such as we commonly encounter in the aisles of supermarkets—look, well, like copies of commercial crates and nothing more. The pictures of Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Jackie Kennedy, and Elvis Presley have similarly receded to the status of artifacts from the history of celebrity-worship—which is no doubt why they now command their biggest resale market in the movie, television, and pop-music industry.

The truth is that Warhol never had much of a talent for painting, and he knew it. He was nothing if not shrewd in assessing his gifts—and his opportunities. The strategies he introduced into the art world of the Sixties remained those that he had mastered

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as a fashion illustrator in the days when he was the darling of the old *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. "He could kid the product so subtly," wrote Calvin Tomkins about Warhol's first success in New York, "that he made the client feel witty." After that initial success as an advertising artist, the art world proved to be a pushover, for it, too, had become crowded with "clients"—only now they were collectors, critics, museum curators, and media types—who could similarly be made to feel witty and wise and "advanced" and special by contemplating a picture of a Campbell's Soup can or a Coca-Cola bottle.

At the Warhol Museum, one comes to realize how essential the hurly-burly of the New York art world was to the kind of excitement Warhol's work generated, for in the company of other artists' works his own were always, in a sense, the dumbest, the plainest, the least embellished with arty touches and a personal signature. This gave them a distinct advantage in the competition that was raging at the time to eliminate from art all trace of association with painterly sensibility or other evidence of loyalty to fine-art traditions. It was a masterstroke on Warhol's part not to attempt to compete directly with Jasper Johns, for example, but to outflank him by abandoning painting altogether for a more commercialized look and method in the pictorial images he produced. Warhol understood that with the advent of Pop Art, the New York School had become a kind of anti-art academy, and all he had to do to triumph in that academy was to carry over into the new art scene the practices he had mastered in the world of fashion and publicity.

In Pittsburgh, in the clean, quiet, well-lighted spaces that Mr. Gluckman has designed for Warhol's pictures, we are a long, long way from both the uproar and controversies of the Sixties and the power of the art world to confer a magical status upon whatever banalities its mandarins seize upon for elevation. Isolated from the moment and the milieu that made its creation possible, the Warhol *oeuvre* is now stripped of its urgency and glamour. Its principal claim on our attention is that of historical documentation—not the documentation of its subject matter, however, for Warhol's pictures have absolutely nothing to tell us about Jackie Kennedy or Campbell's Soup, but the documentation of the artist's career. At the Warhol Museum, it is the life and not the art that establishes itself as the principal focus of attention—which is why, without deliberating the matter, visitors to the museum inevitably end up spending so much more time on the flea-market trash and personal memorabilia than on the art. Hence the mausoleum atmosphere in which the pictures serve as little more than tacky decoration reminding us of the life that is the real object of veneration in this venue.

That Andy Warhol's life should now be made an object of veneration is itself an expression of the moral decadence of our time. No one did more to trivialize the life of art, to devalue seriousness in the interest of a meretricious success, yet his ruinous influence extended well beyond the precincts of the art world. He was an instinctive nihilist, a smiling immoralist, who believed in nothing but the cult of fame. It is appalling that this moral freak, who abetted in the ruin of the more vulnerable freaks he drafted into his service, is now presented in the museum established to perpetuate his legend as a model to be worshiped and emulated by the young. Warhol's career and influence are reminders, if we need them, that the cultural revolution which transformed American life and its institutions in the Sixties cannot be understood solely in terms of the radical politics it fostered. It went deeper than that. It was a moral revolution, and Andy Warhol was as much a fomenter of it as, say, Allen Ginsberg or Norman Mailer. Soon after the Andy Warhol Museum opened in Pittsburgh this year, it was reported that no less an institution than Stanford University had paid more than a million dollars to acquire the personal memorabilia of Allen Ginsberg, and there can be little doubt that there are now plans in progress elsewhere among our elite institutions to create similar memorials

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to the sainted immoralists of the Sixties. These memorials represent the graveyard of a civilization, and it is a melancholy fact that their creation has now become one of the characteristic projects of the Nineties.

To the creation of such projects the contribution of writers, intellectuals, and academics is indispensable, of course. For it is their function to confer high purpose on degraded expression, and thus to turn every sow's ear into the intellectual and even spiritual equivalent of a silk purse. In the collection of essays which the Warhol Museum has published to mark its opening, this corrupt intellectual practice is carried to a new plateau of hermeneutical flimflam as writers compete with each other to bestow prestigious meanings on just about everything Warhol ever turned his hand—or other people's hands—to.

Reading, for example, the essay by Mark Francis, the curator of the museum, one sometimes has to wonder if he hasn't gotten Andy Warhol confused with Albert Schweitzer or even St. Francis. Did Warhol hire a crew of assistants to help turn out his assembly-line images of movie stars? For Mr. Francis, this must be described as "a form of spiritual ministry." Did Warhol produce pictures of Campbell's Soup cans? Then this must be characterized as "a kind of modern democratic sacrament." Indeed, what Mr. Francis insists on calling the "sacramental aspect" of Warhol's production finally collapses into a parody of exegetical excess when he attempts without embarrassment to, as he writes, "consider [Warhol's *oeuvre*] within the terms and traditions of Catholic iconography." He doesn't get very far in this attempt to persuade us that Warhol was some kind of religious artist, though at the end of the essay he is still trying to portray his subject as an example of "invulnerable innocence in a world of venal ambition, manipulation, and destruction."

If for Mr. Francis, the key to Warhol's genius is religion, for Arthur C. Danto it is philosophy—you know, the kind that professors like Mr. Danto teach at our major universities. His essay on this occasion, called "The Philosopher as Andy Warhol," does nothing to improve upon Professor Danto's now famous statement in 1989 that, in his view, Andy Warhol is "the nearest thing to a philosophical genius the history of art has produced." It merely adds a few pseudo-philosophical curlicues to this non-subject by attempting, as he says, "to reveal some fragments of the philosophical structure of Warhol's art." For Professor Danto, "Warhol violated every condition thought necessary to something being an artwork, but in so doing he disclosed the essence of art." And further, about the trashy, amateur movies Warhol made, Professor Danto writes that they must be seen to have made "an unparalleled contribution" to "our philosophical understanding of the concept of film." What follows, alas, makes no contribution whatever to our understanding of film—Warhol's or anyone's—but it does have a lot to tell us about the intellectual bankruptcy of the philosophical vocation in our time. It wasn't only the dopeheads who hung around the Factory who were permanently corrupted by Warhol's enterprise.

Compared to intellectual pretension of such a magnitude, Callie Angell's essay on "Andy Warhol, Filmmaker" is almost amusing for its no doubt unintended comedy in the way it refers to "the purist style found in *Blow Job*" and praises the movie *Fuck*, later renamed *Blue Movie*, as a "deconstruction of pornography." Needless to say, neither of these alleged classics of cinematic purism and deconstruction is currently being shown at the Andy Warhol in Pittsburgh, for you can be sure that the folks who run the museum are not taken in by such intellectual hokum. Writings of this kind, like so much else in this misbegotten museum project, have been designed for public consumption in the hope that the true nature of the enterprise will be missed if the intellectual smokescreens and publicity hoopla are sufficiently effective. So far, unfortunately, the public's inability to see through this cultural farce seems to have been gauged more or less correctly.

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The legacy of Russell Kirk

by David Frum

Russell Kirk, who died this spring at his home in Mecosta, Michigan, at the age of seventy-five, has left behind an intellectual and literary achievement as huge as it is difficult to categorize. He was not exactly a political theorist, nor really a philosopher, certainly not a historian; and yet his work speaks profound truths about politics, philosophy, and history. An ardent enemy of Communism, he was barely more enthusiastic about the commercial civilization of America. An unrelenting critic of "King Numbers," he championed a Goldwaterite conservatism that owed far more to the populism of Jefferson, Jackson, and Tom Paine than to the prescriptive politics of Edmund Burke and John Adams. A scourge of ideology and abstraction in politics, he determinedly refused to pay any attention to the circumstances and context in which the thinkers he studied had lived. He loved old cathedral towns and country fields, ancient mansions and Gothic universities; he hated cars, television, and shopping malls. For all his patriotism, one has to wonder how comfortable he ever really felt in late-twentieth-century America. "Against the lust for change," Kirk wrote of his admired John Randolph, "[he] had fought with all his talents. And though he lost, he fell with a brilliancy that was almost consolation for disaster." Of course, it wasn't just Randolph he had in mind.

Russell Kirk came of one of the many small-town families hit hard by the Depression. His great-grandfather had founded the little town of Mecosta, and his mother's father had owned a bank, but Kirk attended Michigan State on a scholarship and worked at Ford's Rouge River plant after completing his M.A. at Duke in 1941. Kirk was then drafted and stationed in Utah; according to George Nash, author of *The Conservative Intellectual Tradition in America Since 1945*, Kirk cast his first presidential ballot for Norman Thomas in 1944, to reward the veteran socialist for his steadfast opposition to the Second World War. Released from the army, Kirk resumed his studies and began to publish. In 1951 came *John Randolph of Roanoke*, an enlargement of his M.A. thesis, and in 1953, *The Conservative Mind*. The fame that second book won Kirk enabled him to return to Mecosta and settle in his family's house.

A charming 1992 essay by Edwin Feulner, president of the Heritage Foundation, quotes Kirk's description of the place: "over everything brooded an air of faded splendours, vanished lands, and baffled expectations." The house soon sheltered armies of young conservative scholars, and other, more miscellaneous, guests: "unwed mothers, half-reformed burglars, . . . Vietnamese . . . families, waves of Ethiopians, Poles fled from martial law, freedom-seeking Croats, students disgusted with their colleges, and a diversity of waifs and strays from Progress." (The sarcastic upper-case "P" on "Progress" is a characteristic Kirkean flourish.)

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From Mecosta, for four decades, Kirk fired his observations upon the world: two more major scholarly works, *Eliot and His Age* and *The Roots of American Order*, books, essays, ghost stories, lectures, columns for magazines and newspapers. From Mecosta too he cast a sharp and often disapproving eye upon the conservative movement that had sprung up in the years since the publication of *The Conservative Mind*. He disliked libertarians, and apologists for big business, and neoconservatives. He did not mind making enemies: he separated himself from his old friends at *National Review* after 1980, and in a 1988 critique of neoconservatism he let loose the startling observation that "not seldom has it seemed as if some eminent Neoconservatives"—that capital letter again! —"mistook Tel Aviv for the capital of the United States." By the end of his life, he had circled back to his Taftite origins, and joined the opposition to the war in the Persian Gulf.

Kirk's voice echoed less powerfully in those later years than in the 1950s and 1960s. In part, of course, he was the victim of his own success: with conservatives in a position to exercise national political power after 1978, a political thinker who declined to preoccupy himself with the details of public policy —which he left to the "enlightened expediency" of statesmen—inevitably lost audiences to technical experts. Clad in out-of-fashion vested suits, immersed in his old books, smoking (as Feulner says) dark, thick Burmese cigars that looked and tasted like torpedoes, he looked oddly out of place among the sleek Republicans of Reagan-era Washington.

And these stylistic oddities hinted at an even bigger and deeper gulf between Kirk and his Reaganite audience. From the beginning, Kirk had denied key tenets of the American faith. He had openly defended class hierarchies; he doubted the value of technological progress; and, while disliking the growth of the central government, he cared very little for the danger to prosperity and economic growth posed by bigger government. In fact, Kirk regarded "growth," in most cases, as a misnomer for "decay."

> During the late 'fifties and the early 'sixties, I watched in Long Island the devastation of what had been a charming countryside, as dismaying as what was being done to our cities. To make room for a spreading population was necessary: but to do it hideously and stupidly was not ineluctable. Much of the mischief was accomplished by the highways of Robert Moses, generally supposed to be one of the abler of American planners. Speed was everything, speed by automobile from Manhattan to Montauk.

Many thinkers have damned suburbia, but Kirk uniquely dared to reveal the anti-egalitarian implications of the aesthetic critique of American life. "This is my case: there ought to be inequality of condition in the world. For without inequality, there is no class; without class, no manners and no beauty; and then a people sink into public and private ugliness." Ugliness was for him no light accusation. "With Santayana," he said, "I believe that beauty is the index to civilization." By this index, contemporary America scored low. We now live, he bitterly complained in *The Conservative Mind*, in "a world smudged by industrialism, standardized by the masses, consolidated by government."

Nor was Kirk bashful about itemizing the differences between his conservatism and the enthusiastic Jacksonianism found on the right wing of the contemporary Republican Party. He openly disdained populism, denouncing "those who, in the belief that there exists a malign 'elite,' cry, with Carl Sandburg, 'The people, yes!'" As for the Reagan-era project of identifying conservatism's cause as the defense of "democratic capitalism," an optimistic philosophy that commingled high-tech prosperity and ever-widening popular sovereignty . . . well, here's what Kirk had to say about that:

> Previously, even in America, the structure of society had consisted of a hierarchy of personal

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> and local allegiances—man to master, apprentice to preceptor, householder to parish or town, constituent to representative, son to father, communicant to church. . . . This network of personal relationships and local decencies was brushed aside by steam, coal, the spinning jenny, the cotton gin, speedy transportation, and the other items in that catalogue of progress which school children memorize. The Industrial Revolution . . . turned the world inside out. Personal loyalties gave way to financial relationships. . . . Industrialism was a harder knock to conservatism than the books of the French equalitarians. . . .
>
> That the sudden triumph of democracy should coincide with the rise of industrialism was in part the product of intertwined causes; but, however inescapable, it was a conjunction generally catastrophic. Jeffersonian democracy, designed for a simple agrarian people, was thrust upon an acquisitive, impatient, and often urbanized mass of men.

Instead, Kirk throughout his life insisted upon the six "canons" of conservative thought he first identified in *The Conservative Mind*:

1. Belief that a divine intent rules society as well as conscience. . . .
2. Affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of traditional life. . . .
3. Conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes. . . .
4. Persuasion that property and freedom are inseparably connected. . . .
5. Faith in prescription. . . . Tradition and sound prejudice provide checks upon man's anarchic impulse. . . .
6. Recognition that change and reform are not identical, and that innovation is a devouring conflagration more often than it is a torch of progress. . . .

Kirk expressed his major ideas in highly general terms, and so it is hard to know exactly what these six canons imply, especially the final two. When pressed for specifics, Kirk's political advice tended to take the form of negative injunctions.

> Conservative people in politics need to steer clear of the Scylla of abstraction and the Charybdis of opportunism. So it is that folk of conservative inclination ought to decline the embraces of such categories of American political zealots or charlatans as I list below:
>
> Those who demand that the National Parks be sold to private developers. Those who declare that "the test of the market" is the whole of political economy and of morals. Those who fancy that foreign policy can be conducted with religious zeal on a basis of absolute rights and absolute wrongs. . . .

Etcetera. Even Kirk's journalism bears only indirectly on the controversies of his day.

Then again, uncertainty about the implications of his ideas in practice may not matter very much: for Kirk was, at bottom, much more concerned with morals and education than with politics as politics is usually understood. He reserved his energies for other themes, themes sometimes absurdly small, but at other times profound and urgent, as in his remarkable essay "The Rarity of the God-Fearing Man."

"We have to begin," Kirk describes himself telling a group of clergymen, "with the dogma that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." "Oh no," they replied, "not the *fear* of God. You mean the *love* of God, don't you?"

> Looking upon their mild and diffident faces, I wondered how much trust I might put in such love as they knew. Their meekness was not that of Moses. Meek before Jehovah, Moses had no fear of Pharaoh; but these doctors of the schools, much at ease in Zion, were timid in the presence of a traffic policeman. Although convinced that God is too indulgent to punish much of anything, they were given to trembling before Caesar. . . . Gauleiters and commissars? Why, their fellowship and charity was not proof against a dean or a divisional head. . . .
>
> Every age portrays God in the image of its poetry and its politics. In one century, God is an absolute monarch, exacting his due; in another century, still an absolute sovereign, but a benevolent despot; again, perhaps a

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> grand gentleman among aristocrats; at a different time, a democratic president, with an eye to the ballot box. It has been said that to many of our generation, God is a Republican and works in a bank; but this image is giving way, I think, to God as Chum—at worst, God as a playground supervisor. . . .
>
> In a Michigan college town stands an immense quasi-Gothic church building, and the sign upon the porch informs the world that this is "The People's Church, Nondenominational and Nonsectarian." Sometimes, passing by, a friend of mine murmurs, "The People's Church—formerly God's" . . . From the People's Church, the fear of God, with its allied wisdom, has been swept away. So have I.

Kirk's literary productivity commands awe. He took particular pride in his ghost stories: His spare curriculum vitae modestly omits mention of nearly all his innumerable awards and honorary degrees, except for three that especially pleased him—one of them being the Ann Radcliffe Award of the Count Dracula Society. ("A child's fearful joy in stories of goblins, witches, and ghosts is a natural yearning after the challenge of the dreadful: raw head and bloody bones, in one form or another, the imagination demands.") In all the millions of words he set in print, however, he never amended or retracted any of the thoughts and formulations of the masterpiece he published at age thirty-two, *The Conservative Mind*.

"Professor J. W. Williams kindly read the manuscript of this book; and in his library at the Roundel, looking upon the wreck of St. Andrews cathedral, we talked of the inundation which only here and there has spared an island of humane learning like St. Andrews town." Those words, the opening sentence of the acknowledgments to *The Conservative Mind*, and the first of Russell Kirk's that most of his readers will encounter, demonstrate what a fine literary artist he could be. You might close the book right there, and Kirk would already have stabbed you with a pang of loss and regret. An old cliché has it that a great actor can wring tears out of audience by reading a laundry list. Kirk could summon up nostalgia with a list of place-names. "These chapters have been written in a variety of places: in a but-and-ben snuggled under the cliffs of Eigg; in one of the ancient towers of Kellie Castle, looking out to the Forth; in my great-grandfather's house in the stump-country of Michigan; among the bogs of Sligo in the west of Ireland; upon the steps of Ara Coeli, in Rome; at Balcarres House, where what Burke calls 'the unbought grace of life' still abides."

Kirk was writing in the aftermath of the forty most catastrophic years in the history of Western civilization, and at the beginning of another forty of the most tense and terrifying. It must have seemed to him that everything he treasured had either been pulverized by war or would soon be bulldozed by one form of socialism or another. He strained all his powers to summon up a vision of the Anglo-American past that would stir the imagination, and entice us to preserve as much of the vanished aristocratic age he loved as we possibly could. In form, *The Conservative Mind* appears to be intellectual history. Each of its chapters closely studies the writing of a conservative thinker or group of thinkers: Edmund Burke; John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and Fisher Ames; Walter Scott and Samuel Taylor Coleridge; Benjamin Disraeli and Cardinal Newman; Irving Babbitt and George Santayana; and many others. In fact, history is the one thing *The Conservative Mind* is not. Kirk repeatedly declares his lack of interest in the tangle of facts and events from which his subjects' ideas emerged. He takes his ideas as he finds them, the way an anthropologist might examine an artifact or a New Critic, a poem. Was John C. Calhoun's dramatic midlife switch from nationalism to sectionalism motivated by his commitment to slavery? Kirk does not inquire.

> The whole grim slavery-problem, to which no satisfactory answer was possible, warped and discolored the American political mind, on either side of the debate, for the earlier two-thirds of the nineteenth century. So far as it is

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> possible, we shall try to keep clear here of that partisan controversy over slavery and to penetrate, instead, beneath the froth of abolitionist harangues and Southern fire-eating to those conservative ideas which Randolph and Calhoun enunciated.

Are we really to take Benjamin Disraeli's flights of political fancy seriously as expressing a distinctive Tory philosophy? It doesn't matter whether we do.

> In truth, Disraeli's positive legislation sometimes was inconsistent with his theory, and in any case inferior to it. His really important achievement, as a political leader, was implanting in the public imagination an ideal of Toryism which has been immeasurably valuable in keeping Britain faithful to her constitutional and spiritual traditions.

No, *The Conservative Mind* isn't history; it is a work of literature meant to achieve political ends.

This isn't to deny that Kirk could produce acute analysis of earlier times when it suited his purposes. Kirk's erasure of Alexander Hamilton—the hero of an earlier generation of conservative Republicans—from the conservative canon shows his historical intelligence at its best.

> It hardly seems to have occurred to Hamilton's mind that a consolidated nation might also be a levelling and innovating nation, though he had the example of Jacobin France right before him; and he does not appear to have reflected on the possibility that force in government may be applied to other purposes than the maintenance of a conservative order. . . . All his revolutionary ardour notwithstanding, Hamilton loved English society as an English colonial adores it. His vision of the coming America was of another, stronger, richer, eighteenth-century England. . . .
>
> [T]hat industrialization of America which Hamilton successfully promoted was burdened with consequences the haughty and forceful new aristocrat did not perceive. Commerce and manufactures, he believed, would produce a body of wealthy men whose interests would coincide with those of the national commonwealth. Probably he conceived of these pillars of society as being very like great English merchants—purchasing country estates, forming presently a stable class possessed of leisure, talent, and means, providing moral and political and intellectual leadership for the nation. The actual American businessman, generally speaking, has turned out to be a different sort of person: it is difficult to reproduce social classes from a model three thousand miles over the water. Modern captains of industry might surprise Hamilton, modern cities shock him, and the power of industrial labor frighten him: for Hamilton never quite understood the transmuting power of social change, which in its operation is more miraculous than scientific. Like Dr. Faustus' manservant, Hamilton could evoke elementals; but once materialized, that new industrialism swept away from the control of eighteenth-century virtuosos like the masterful Secretary of the Treasury. . . .
>
> Hamilton was a straggler behind his age, rather than the prophet of a new day. By a very curious coincidence, this old-fangled grand gentleman died from the bullet of Aaron Burr, friend and disciple of Bentham.

Thinkers whom Kirk sought to include, rather than exclude, from his canon sometimes met, however, more procrustean fates. It's fascinating to compare, for instance, the exegesis of a single sentence of Edmund Burke's both by Kirk and by Conor Cruise O'Brien in his recent study, *The Great Melody*. First, Kirk:

> "I heaved the lead every inch of the way I made," Burke observed of his career, in the *Letter to a Noble Lord*. Heaving the lead is not a practice for which Irish orators are renowned; Burke's flights of eloquent fancy everyone knows; and surely Burke did not seem at Hasting's trial, to frightened Tory spectators, a man sworn to cautious plumbing of the depths. Yet Burke spoke accurately of his general policy as a statesman, for he based his every important decision upon a close examination of particulars. He detested "abstrac-

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tion"—by which he meant not *principle*, but rather vainglorious generalization without respect for human frailty and the particular circumstances of an age and nation. Thus it was that while he believed in the rights of Englishmen and in certain human rights of universal application, he despised the "Rights of Man" which Paine and the French doctrinaires were soon to proclaim inviolable.

Now O'Brien.

> The occasion for the composition of *Letter to a Noble Lord* was an attack by two Whig peers, the Duke of Bedford and the Earl of Lauderdale, in the Lords on 13 November 1795 on the pension which had been granted to Burke in the previous year, on his retirement from Parliament. . . . It enabled Edmund to pay his debts and to be assured, during his last illness, that his widow would not have to face a life of poverty. . . .
>
> Inevitably, Burke's many enemies, among the Whigs and the radicals, triumphed. . . . It was the thirty pieces of silver. . . . Burke had received an enormous amount of abuse and innuendo—more than any other politician—in his long political career. In *Letter to a Noble Lord* he called it "the hunt of obloquy, which ever has pursued me with full cry through life." Most of those attacks came from anonymous writers in the corrupt press of the time, faceless and unaccountable tormenters. Burke did not answer those ever. The Duke of Bedford, on the other hand, was a marvelous target. . . .
>
> He was also vulnerable. The Bedford family, since the days of Henry VIII, had been beneficiaries of Crown patronage on a colossal scale. Thus, by attacking Burke's modest pension, the Duke had unwittingly laid himself open to the most devastating *argumentum ad hominem* in the history of English controversy. . . . It contains [in the "heaving the lead" passage], with much else, Burke's grave and succinct rebuttal to the charge of venality that dogged him throughout his life, and has clung to his reputation ever since.

In some respects, obviously, Kirk's reading of the sentence is better. Kirk never even acknowledged, much less succumbed to, the contemporary urge to psychologize and personalize every human utterance. His Burke is a public man, and a public man's public statements are given public meanings by Kirk. Too, Kirk relies only on what he can see in the documentary record; O'Brien's conviction that he possesses some special intuition into Burke's Irish soul that justifies leaps beyond the available facts would have irritated Kirk no end. Even so, and for all that, O'Brien's Burke is a *man*—maybe a badly misunderstood man, but a man all the same. Kirk's Burke is a repository of political wisdom, the author of a series of preternatural insights on which, two hundred years later, a political movement can be grounded.

Russell Kirk has always reminded me of those nineteenth-century Central European historians who promoted national consciousness by writing passionate histories of "nations" that had not existed until those same historians invented them. And just as the nationalist historians manufactured "Croatia" or "Czechoslovakia" out of half-forgotten medieval and baroque fragments, Russell Kirk inspired the postwar conservative movement by pulling together a series of only partially related ideas and events into a coherent narrative—even, although Kirk objected to the word, into an ideology. Kirk did not record the past; he created it. He gathered the words of his political exemplars to answer his burning question:

> What is the essence of British and American conservatism? What system of ideas, common to England and the United States, has sustained men of conservative instincts in their resistance against radical theories and social transformation since the beginning of the French revolution?

As a question, of course, Kirk's query takes far too much for granted. Can one in fact fuse the English and American political traditions together in this way? Was the dilemma of the English Tories—how to

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maintain aristocratic deference in a democratizing society?—truly identical to that of American conservatives in the North—how to maintain the virtues of the founders' way of life in the face of colossal, unexpected wealth and exploding, non-Anglo-Saxon, populations?—and South—how to preserve white supremacy in the face of Northern criticism and an agricultural way of life in an industrial age? But Kirk's question is not a question. It is a prelude to a romantic reading of the past for the purposes of the present. No wonder, then, that *The Conservative Mind* found little favor with professional historians. Writers of the Left may be able to get away with devising "usable pasts": Certainly Michel Foucault and the writers of women's history distort the past for their own polemical purposes on a scale and with a brazen falsity that would have made Kirk gasp. But in the hostile purlieus of the academy, writers of the Right must be more careful.

Yet if Kirk's great work cannot be counted as history, exactly, it ought to be esteemed as something in some ways more important: a profound critique of contemporary mass society, and a vivid and poetic image—not a program, an image—of how that society might better itself. It is, in important respects, the twentieth century's own version of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. If Kirk was not a historian, he was an artist, a visionary, almost a prophet. As long as he lived, by word and example he cautioned conservatives against over-indulging their fascination with economics. He taught that conservativism was above all a *moral* cause: one devoted to the preservation of the priceless heritage of Western civilization.

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Made in Italy, sold by the Guggenheim

by Karen Wilkin

I should state at once that I am not impartial about anything to do with Italy—or with cats, but that's another matter. I could invoke Baudelaire's assertion that the best criticism is "*partiale, passionnée, politique*"—subjective, impassioned, committed—but it's really a case of incurable Italophilia. Living in Italy, mostly in Rome, during the 1960s, not only honed my perceptions of art, architecture, and the urban environment but shaped my preferences in food, clothing, and almost everything else; essentially it formed me, then in my twenties, as an adult. I'm going into all this to provide a context for my response to the current extravaganza at the uptown Guggenheim, "The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943–1968."[1]

I went to the show freighted with nostalgia, wanting to like it, and entertaining the possibility of being deeply engaged. Having seen previous exhibitions organized by the show's mastermind, Germano Celant, I knew what to expect: the ambitious multimedia approach that he describes in his introduction to the show's gargantuan catalogue:

> The treatment of a cultural epoch should not admit any disciplinary limits. It is the history of images and ideas, projects and customs, objects and documents, and for this reason it is obliged to include every aesthetic language: architecture, art, comics, cinema, design, fashion, literature, photography, theater, artists' crafts.

"The Italian Metamorphosis" is a typical Celant production, so my nostalgia was amply taken care of by posters and stills from movies that I had seen in *prima visione*, by stylish Castiglioni lamps that I had first seen in the homes of Roman architect friends, and by books and catalogues that are still in my library. (The role of literature, as in any Celant-curated show, is acknowledged by exhibiting books, magazines, and pamphlets in display cases.) In the fashion section, an elaborate evening gown by the fiercely respectable Sorelle Fontana, dressmakers to the Roman nobility and assorted movie stars, reminded me of attending their fashion shows, not because I was remotely a potential client but because their public-relations person—a title always pronounced in heavily accented English—was my college classmate. I remembered, too, lusting after racy, unstructured Missoni garments, like the ones exhibited from the 1968 collection, which look just as fresh, innovative, and desirable as they did back then.

So much for sentiment. What about aesthetic engagement? That, I am afraid, is a

1 "The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943–1968" opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, on October 7, 1994, and remains on view through January 22, 1995. It then travels to Milan (February–May 1995) and Wolfsburg (May–September 1995). A catalogue has been published by the Guggenheim in association with Harry N. Abrams (727 pages, $85; $50 paper).

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different story. There are evocative, intelligent, and even powerful works in the exhibition, but the whole falls a little flat, and from time to time, irritates. Some of this is probably the cumulative effect of the extreme refinement of much of what is exhibited, the adroitness and delicacy essential to the best of everything Italian that can slide into self-consciousness and over-elegance—like an extended pinky. But much of the blame attaches to the show's thesis and the resulting nature of Celant's selections.

"The Italian Metamorphosis" is highly politicized; choices often seem determined as much by artists' declared allegiances as by aesthetic imperatives. I suppose this is understandable. Since the exhibition begins when the Badoglio government replaced Mussolini, it's not surprising that artists associated with the Fascists are not represented while those who resisted or left the country rather than support Mussolini even tacitly, like the sculptor Fausto Melotti or the painter Lucio Fontana, are given pride of place. It is more difficult to rationalize the virtually wholesale exclusion of the figurative painters at work during the years examined by the exhibition, many of whom were important influences on the current generation of Italian artists. Renato Guttuso's expressionist-cum-social-realist version of the crucifixion, notorious when it was first exhibited, is made to stand for almost the entire tradition of modern-day Italian figuration. Guttuso's role as official arbiter of culture for the postwar Italian Communist Party may explain his inclusion; he is the perfect symbol of the PCI's preference for realism over abstraction.

More surprising is the absence of Giorgio Morandi, arguably the most distinguished and quite likely the best of twentieth-century Italian painters, a subtle, inventive artist who, more than perhaps any other European modernist except Matisse, makes categories of figuration and non-figuration irrelevant. Not only is Morandi's work totally absent from "The Italian Metamorphosis" but his death in 1964 is not even noted in the catalogue's chronology, an otherwise comprehensive document that includes events of such cultural importance as the launching of a new perfume. (I'm not alone here; Umberto Eco, in his foreword to the catalogue, also objects to the exclusion of Morandi, whose work he asserts opened his eyes to the potency of art.)

But Celant's reasoning becomes abundantly clear as you work your way up the ramp of the Guggenheim. Despite his insistence that he was concerned not only with his own "critical position" but with "an identification of the philosophical and artistic characteristics of Italian culture, as well as [with] a consideration of the historical precedents of the period covered," it becomes obvious that "The Italian Metamorphosis" is designed to confirm the preeminence of *Arte Povera*, the 1960s movement distinguished by its rejection of traditional forms and materials in favor of elaborate processes and modes of construction usually associated with other disciplines. (Don't take the word *povera*—meaning "poor"—too literally.) It becomes apparent that *Arte Povera*, in Celant's view, epitomizes "the philosophical and artistic characteristics of Italian culture." Once you grasp this, a great deal that is puzzling about the emphasis accorded to particular artists becomes less puzzling. It accounts, for example, for why we are treated to a mini-retrospective of the work of Jannis Kounellis, an early exponent of *Arte Povera*, best known here for high-style installations of industrial materials, often punctuated by "drawings" made with the flame of a welding torch. (It turns out that Kounellis has tried more or less everything, and has looked harder at Miró's work of the 1920s than you would otherwise suspect, but the attention accorded to his development still seems excessive.)

Some selections remain just as mysterious. How was the decision made to include twenty-nine, non-sequentially numbered cans of Piero Manzoni's *Merda d'Artista* and not some other quantity? Why those particular cans and not the others in the sequence? Obviously, they are meant to

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be considered individually, since each is reproduced separately, in color, in the catalogue, with a separate entry. Non-Italian speakers may miss the pun in these scatological works—a *scatoletta* is a can of foodstuff—but I'm not sure that knowing this helps.

Celant makes no attempt to disguise his bias. If you can stand the bombast, it's worth quoting at length from what he writes about *Arte Povera* in the catalogue:

> With *Arte Povera*, the immense subtlety of things and the senses unfolds: architecture and history, chemical reactions and natural events. It is art premised on the wish to remain, at all costs, on a direct line with reality.
>
> The point is to question every level of existence, not only color and line, canvas and form, volume and space, but to operate in harmony and a state of tension with the enigma of beings and the elements, letting go of all linguistic injunctions in order to move freely through all realms, from sea to meadow, ice to air, intimate to social, symbolic to historical, chemical to alchemical. Art thus moves beyond the limitations of the consensus in favor of this or that genre and is transformed into an aesthetic totality that knows no limits. Among the artists taking part in this heady experiment were those emerging from the experiences of the early 1960s: [Luciano] Fabro, [Jannis] Kounellis, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, [Giulio] Paolini, [Pino] Pascali, and [Michelangelo] Pistoletto, as well as the younger artists Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Giuseppe Penone, Emilio Prini, and Gilberto Zorio.

This is a relatively restrained passage; I did warn you. Whether or not you agree that the work produced by the movement supports these extravagant claims is almost beside the point. What the essay doesn't mention is that among those taking part in the "heady experiment" was *Arte Povera*'s "discoverer" and most dedicated champion: Germano Celant.

All of the artists on Celant's list, except Prini, figure prominently at the Guggenheim. Most of the other painters and sculptors in the show, even those accorded a good deal of attention, are cast in the role of precursors. While it's not surprising that Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana, for example, are well represented, given their reputations, you begin to suspect that Celant's enthusiasm for Burri's cobbled-together sacks and Fontana's slashed surfaces has less to do with their inherent merits than with their connection with Fabro's draped cloths or Marisa Merz's raveled textile constructions. *Arte Povera*'s desire "to remain on a direct line with reality" may justify some of the show's rare figurative paintings, Domenico Gnoli's hyper-realist, overscaled "portraits" of shirts, bedcovers, and rucked-up tablecloths, like giant props from some surrealist drama. Gnoli—a promising painter who died young—might have been included in any case, but the weighting of the majority of the selections begins to force everything into a relationship with *Arte Povera*.

If you ignore Celant's polemics and concentrate on the works themselves, you are often rewarded. Burri, Fontana, and Emilio Vedova are among the strongest painters in the show, while Fausto Melotti is perhaps the most compelling of the sculptors. His small, fragile reliefs evoke shrines and votive offerings, vernacular artifacts made precious by the passage of time. Here delicacy and refinement work to his advantage, as they do in his large-scale works, agonizingly slender "anti-sculptures" that seem more about the space they tentatively punctuate than about form. A thoughtfully selected exhibition at Paolo Baldacci Gallery during the month of October provided a fuller introduction to Melotti's work and confirmed that his frail, wiry constructions owe a good deal to Picasso and González, but are no less individual because of it. In the same way, Fontana's debt to Miró is evident, but this in no way diminishes the excellence of his suavely inflected expanses of subtle color, punctured and slashed in ways that provoke questions about the dual nature of the Western painting as object and illusion. At the same time,

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these "attacks" on the canvas function in purely visual terms as drawing, at once ravishing and brutally aggressive. (It's worth pointing out that a 1959 Fontana superior to almost anything in "The Italian Metamorphosis" is currently hanging in the back room of Baldacci Gallery, if only because its presence confirms Celant's reputation for, as a colleague put it recently, "picking only the pictures he already knows.")

Burri's images, like Fontana's, tread carefully between declaration of materiality and illusion. There's always the risk that his arrangements of tattered sacking (or, in his later works, crumpled plastic) will degenerate into mere artful effect, but when they succeed, they become eloquent multilayered metaphors for the passage of time, for wounding and bandaging, for cure and decay, and more, all filtered through a memory of a domesticated and humbled Cubism. It's not irrelevant—although it seems improbable—that Burri was a physician who began to make collages when he was a prisoner of war in rural Texas, using sugar sacks and whatever else he could find in that unlikely setting. The danger in Burri's work—as in any art that incorporates found objects, whether the objects are selected for their surface qualities or their forms—is that the new context will fail to transform them, so that the previous history of the materials overwhelms their new meaning. The problem persists in the work of many of the artists in the show, especially those more directly associated with *Arte Povera*, for whom a desperate cleverness, a relentless search for novelty in materials, often dominates to the exclusion of anything else.

Vedova's muscular, gestural canvases and loose-jointed constructions raise other, more vexing issues. To American eyes, indeed to anyone familiar with the history of American abstraction of the 1940s and '50s, comparison with Pollock, Kline, and de Kooning is inevitable. Since, by the 1950s, Abstract Expressionist artists represented the U.S. at the Venice Biennial, and were seen in traveling exhibitions as well as in international magazines, it's reasonable to assume a connection between this American model of abstraction and Vedova's slashing, wet-into-wet gestures, his layered strokes, and his evident desire to reveal the history of each picture's making. It takes nothing away from Vedova, whose best work stands out for its vigor and refreshing rudeness, to note this. Celant, however, insists on the difference between what he sees as Vedova's spontaneous, sensual way of working and what he deems to be a repressed, reductive American approach. What makes this doubly confusing is that while Celant apparently accepts Harold Rosenberg's conception of Abstract Expressionist painting as a kind of flailing about that results in all-but-unwilled visual records of "actions" performed in the grip of heightened emotion—and implies that Vedova works this way—he simultaneously equates American abstraction with minimalism and "empty" formalism.

Celant's catalogue essays leave no doubt about his contempt for American culture, which he regards as naïve, puritanical, reactionary, and materialist. Americans, he believes, are frightened by and/or unable to appreciate the sensuality, allusiveness, and progressiveness inherent in Italian art. He subscribes, as well, to the fashionable notion that the attention paid to American abstract art in the postwar years—and after—was the result of a government—read CIA—conspiracy and owed little or nothing to the merits of the art itself. Even more problematic, given the roster of names offered in evidence, is Celant's suggestion that artists such as Burri, Fontana, and Vedova influenced the Americans whose works were included in the *Bienali* or who came to Italy as Rome Prize winners and Fulbright fellows. It's difficult to believe, for example, that the anguished figures Philip Guston painted when he was at the American Academy, in the late Forties, were a response to anything other than Renaissance frescos; on the other hand, unlike others on Celant's list, Guston *was* in Italy.

Celant's Italocentrism could be dismissed as mere chauvinism, but his efforts to iden-

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tify particular national characteristics seem motivated by a genuine belief in their significance. He has stated, for example, that he regards the existence of such characteristics in art as a last line of defense against the growing homogeneousness of the modern world, the blurring of differences that has resulted from widespread dissemination of information, especially visual information, and ease of travel. These days, artists working on opposite sides of the globe frequently seem to share a set of references. Perhaps that's a way of saying that since the 1960s, the whole of Western art—and some non-Western art—has been in the grip of an international style, just as Europe was during the Gothic period.

It may be to Celant's credit that there is an unmistakably Italian flavor to the work at the Guggenheim, so much so that I'm willing to accept his assertion that Piero Dorazio's all-over abstractions of the 1960s, shimmering expanses built up of overlapping colored lines, are derived principally from the vibrating "force-fields" of Futurist painting. But it's also clear that Italian artists of the 1960s, or at least the ones in Celant's show, were exploring ideas current among their colleagues elsewhere in Europe, Great Britain, and the U.S., testing extremes of reductiveness and inclusiveness, severity and elaboration, high-mindedness and deliberate outrageousness—notions that were common currency in the international art scene—rather than concentrating on more parochial issues. Sometimes the results would be indistinguishable from counterparts made in other places, if we weren't told otherwise. Francesco Lo Savio's near-monochrome, deadpan expanses, for example, which could be described as generic minimalist abstraction, turn out to have nothing to do with minimalism or American (reductive, puritanical, reactionary, empty) art as a whole; instead, we are informed, they are intended as expressions of such phenomena of modern life as the blank television screen and hence can be read as protests against the materialism and consumerism of Italy during the Boom.

Does Celant's multifarious approach—his inclusion of photographs, glass, ceramics, furniture, industrial design, jewelry, architecture, and fashion items, along with "conventional" painting and sculpture—enhance our perception of national characteristics and of what he calls "the cultural epoch"? It does, by allowing us to trace overlapping concerns and shared convictions that cut across media and disciplines, evidence of common assumptions and a common heritage. In these we begin to recognize an identifiable, if elusive, national character, comprising elegance, wit, fine craftsmanship, and *style*, most visible in the struggle waged by present-day Italian artists, artisans, architects, and designers to come to terms with their culture's distinguished history. For some, like the most deliberately far-out members of the *Arte Povera* gang, this takes the form of a near-total rupture with the past; others strive for peaceful coexistence, acknowledging the value of an inherited tradition, but reinventing its vocabulary to respond to twentieth-century conditions. Carla Accardi's transparent cylindrical sculptures, for example, with their rhythmic patterning and fluid ribbons of color, have as much to do with eighteenth-century Venetian glass as they do with twentieth-century abstract art. On the whole, the comprehensiveness of the exhibition strengthens our awareness not of differences between the practitioners of the various disciplines represented but rather of what links them: a pervading sense of energy, of delight in enlarged possibilities, of pleasure in experimentation, whether with forms, materials, or concepts—a kind of national celebration of the end of Fascist repression and wartime privation.

Yet, at the same time that you are grateful for the ambition of the show's reach, and charmed by the inclusion of day-to-day artifacts that bring the period to life—the full-size wooden prototype for the new, postwar Fiat 500 is one of the most enchanting, resonant objects in the show—much of the material that represents the era is, of necessity, reduced to a mere "sign." A single Joe

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Columbo chair of molded plastic stands for a whole range of well-designed, modestly priced furniture, lamps, and household objects newly available, in the 1960s, at the chain "La Rinascente" and by extension, an entire conception of domestic life. Movies are encapsulated in stills and posters, and sketched in a sort of crazy-quilt video program whose visual quality, when I saw it, at least, could have been much improved; I've already commented on the display of books, catalogues, and other printed matter. It's all well-intentioned, often entertaining, and inadequate, at best. The cover of the original Feltrinelli edition of *Il Gattopardo* tells you nothing about Lampedusa's rich, precise, and elegant prose, his penetrating characterizations, or his absorbing storytelling; a poster of the controversial film *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* conveys nothing of Pasolini's stark black-and-white images, derived at once from Piero della Francesca and the everyday life of impoverished Southern Italian towns, and conveys nothing of the film's nervous, driven pacing, its inexorable energy.

Architecture, which must by its very nature be dealt with in exhibitions in an approximate, symbolic way, is especially poorly served at the Guggenheim, in part because of space constraints. The vitality and variety of postwar rebuilding is reduced to rows of small black-and-white photographs displayed in curious troughs, and a group of small models, crowded together in the center of the room. Architecture matters in Italy. It is present in the collective consciousness in ways unimaginable to Americans. University students (the ones who don't become lawyers) enroll in architecture programs the way students here used to major in English—to obtain a civilized, liberal-arts education. Twenty years ago, there were eighteen thousand students at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Rome; a comparable American school might have a few hundred. Furniture, fabric, and dress designers have architecture degrees; subtleties of design are important. Given the significance and inventiveness of Italian postwar architecture, the sketchy treatment of this section of the show constitutes a real loss, but in compensation the catalogue essays on the subject, by the architect Vittorio Gregotti and by Dennis Doordan, are among the most informative in the mammoth volume.

Not surprisingly, the photography section of "The Italian Metamorphosis" is one of the most comprehensive and best parts of the show. The selection is broad, with images ranging from disturbing documentary records of village and urban life, the factory, and postwar growing pains, to unexpected near-abstractions, improvisations on the fabric of the city or wintry fields. The documentary photographs remind us forcibly of what we are missing in the cinema section by presenting us with vivid, graphic evidence of the patterns and rhythms of Italian life.

The photographs remind us, too, of the vast differences between the regions of Italy, differences of opportunity, wealth, language, and behavior that have proved remarkably persistent, despite the leveling effect of television and increased mobility. There's an enduring perception, a kind of politically incorrect folk-wisdom, which says that for the Roman, Africa begins at Naples, for the Florentine, at Rome, and for the Milanese, at Florence. In the period under review in "The Italian Metamorphosis," such disparities were even more acute. Only Milan and Turin could have been called modern cities in the 1960s; Rome, as the Romans kept telling you, was a village, except for the disreputable presence of the Cinecittá crowd; the term "Eurotrash" was not yet in use, but was embodied daily in the chic restaurants and caffés. It certainly was a conservative place. Theological students at the various national seminaries were required to wear long cassocks in public and exactly two restaurants, one of them not very good, in the bohemian Trastevere quarter, would allow a woman wearing trousers to enter. In 1966, in fashion-conscious Rome, I watched a mob form around a couple of my dress-designer friends from London as they made

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their way across the Piazza del Pantheon to my apartment; Ossie's bell-bottoms and Celia's mini-skirt caused a near-riot. (Her being a very pretty blonde probably helped, too.)

Some of this variousness and regional richness comes through in the copious illustrations and wide-ranging texts in the catalogue of "The Italian Metamorphosis." Written by a variety of experts, the essays deal meticulously with all aspects of the show, including its historical context. For the most part, they are thorough, absorbing, and often enlightening. Stephen Sartarelli's translations are eminently readable and, at the same time, suggest the Italianness of Italian prose. What's truly astonishing is the absence of a translator's credit for Celant's overwrought contributions, which read, at their most florid, like bad translations; apparently that's how they were intended to be. The catalogue is a truly daunting object. At more than seven hundred pages of extremely good-quality, heavy-coated stock, it's the largest thing on my shelf (no mean accomplishment, given catalogues these days) and weighs appreciably more than a full-grown male Maine Coon cat (no mean accomplishment, given the general heft of Maine Coons). If you can lift it, the catalogue does contain useful, interesting information, although an index would have been welcome.

Does "The Italian Metamorphosis" present a reasonable overview of what Celant calls "the cultural epoch" in postwar Italy? Reluctantly, I would have to say that it does, although it is plainly a survey shaped by a not disinterested individual. Spending an afternoon at Milan's Civic Museum of Contemporary Art, dreary exhibition spaces notwithstanding, would give you a far more complete picture of what happened, at least as far as painting and sculpture are concerned, and from a less politicized, less self-serving point of view. But I suspect that such a visit would only reinforce the impression given by "The Italian Metamorphosis" that the real creative energy of modern-day Italy is not to be found in its art galleries or museums—even when those art galleries and museums aim at comprehensiveness, as the Guggenheim does in this exhibition. The most that comprehensiveness can do is hint at the truth: that at least since 1943 architecture, film, and fashion, not painting and sculpture, have been the repositories of the greatest innovation and invention in Italy—disciplines whose manifestations are remarkably resistant to anything but direct, unmediated, real-life experience.

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Elizabeth Bowen: the house, the hotel & the child

by Richard Tillinghast

To read Elizabeth Bowen is to enter, both with pleasure and with consternation, the world of the Anglo-Irish: that spiritually hyphenated class which has all but vanished from Ireland since the Easter Rebellion of 1916 and the foundation of the Republic. As a British Protestant ruling class which owned land taken by force from the Irish Catholic population, the Anglo-Irish were always, from the sixteenth century on, to some degree rootless and insecure in the country they governed. But the Land Wars and legislation of the late nineteenth century set into motion forces that would soon deprive the Protestant land-owning classes of whatever *raison d'être* they had. By the time Bowen was born in 1899, the shadows of what Mark Bence-Jones has called, in his 1987 book of the same name, the "Twilight of the Ascendancy," had already lengthened dramatically.

Though she spent most of her adult life in England, and London is in some ways the center of her fictional world, Elizabeth Bowen was the daughter of a County Cork "big house" called Bowen's Court, which she inherited and, unable to afford its upkeep on her earnings as a writer, eventually had to sell in 1959. She was born into a Protestant Ascendancy that rose to power and distinction in the eighteenth century and went into decline by the late nineteenth. Comparisons to the planter aristocracy of the American South are roughly, but only roughly, apt. The alienation of the Anglo-Irish landowner, set above and isolated from the "native" population, is a vantage point to which Bowen refers often when writing of Ireland. "I have grown up," she writes in her essay "The Big House" (1940), "accustomed to seeing out of my windows nothing but grass, sky, tree, to being enclosed in a ring of almost complete silence and to making journeys for anything that I want."

Visiting these houses today as a guest or a tourist, one feels the uncanny accuracy with which Bowen captures the strangeness emanating from these gray limestone piles, Palladian or neo-Gothic, set starkly against the primal green of the Irish countryside:

> Each house seems to live under its own spell, and that is the spell that falls on the visitor from the moment he passes in at the gates. The ring of woods inside the demesne wall conceals, at first, the whole demesne from the eye: this looks, from the road, like a *bois dormant*, with a great glade inside. Inside the gates the avenue often describes loops, to make itself of still more extravagant length; it is sometimes arched by beeches, sometimes silent with moss. On each side lie those tree-studded grass spaces we Anglo-Irish call lawns and English people puzzle us by speaking of as "the park." On these browse cattle, or there may be horses out on the grass. A second gate—(generally white-painted, so that one may not drive into it in the dark)—keeps these away from the house in its inner circle of trees. Having shut this clanking white gate behind one, one takes

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> the last reach of avenue and meets the faded, dark-windowed and somehow hypnotic stare of the big house. Often a line of mountains rises above it, or a river is seen through a break in woods. But the house, in its silence, seems to be contemplating the swell or fall of its own lawns.

The sense of the house "contemplating" its surroundings is pure Bowen—one of many instances of a house as a living entity: an Irish house or just any house. In her novel *The House in Paris* (1949), she writes: "The cautious steps of women when something has happened came downstairs, sending vibrations up the spine of the house." Just how remote, how starved for company, the houses must have seemed when their day had passed can be gathered from the opening sentences of *The Last September* (1929):

> About six o'clock the sound of a motor, collected out of the wide country and narrowed under the trees of the avenue, brought the household out in excitement on to the steps. Up among the beeches, a thin iron gate twanged; the car slid out of a net of shadow down the slope to the house. Behind the flashing windscreen Mr. and Mrs. Montmorency produced—arms waving and a wild escape to the wind of her mauve motor veil—an agitation of greeting. They were long-promised visitors.

Many of the Anglo-Irish found it convenient to forget how they came by their land in the first place. In *Bowen's Court* (1942, revised 1964), her classic family history, and elsewhere, Elizabeth Bowen does not shy away from admitting that her original Welsh ancestor (the name Bowen derives from the Welsh *ap Owen*, "son of Owen") was granted land taken from the defeated Irish owners as booty from Oliver Cromwell's campaign to put down the rebellion of the 1640s. At the same time she makes a positive claim for the value of the country-house culture founded by people of her class. This culture, molded in the age of Gandon and Swift and Burke, retained in its architecture and its literary style the clean lines of classicism. And Bowen saw in big-house life, too, a ritualistic element that was practically religious. How the housemaid Matchett, in *The Death of the Heart* (1938), prepares for the night in the London establishment that she serves is informed by her English country-house training:

> About now [i.e., about 10:30 P.M.], she served the idea of sleep with a series of little ceremonials—laying out night clothes, levelling fallen pillows, hospitably opening up the beds. Kneeling to turn on bedroom fires, stooping to slip bottles between sheets, she seemed to abase herself to the overcoming night. The impassive solemnity of her preparations made a sort of an altar of each bed: in big houses in which things are done properly, there is always the religious element.

As its last owner, Elizabeth Bowen describes her house, built in 1776, as "a high bare Italianate house" and elsewhere as a "great bare block," "severely classical." Like Newbridge in County Dublin, Castle Ward in County Down, the ruin of Tyrone House in County Galway, and many another Irish big house, Bowen's Court, which was pulled down in 1960, was an austere rectangle of limestone that dominated the landscape from its imposing elevation. "After an era of greed, roughness and panic, after an era of camping in charred or desolate ruins (as my Cromwellian ancestors did certainly), these new settlers who had been imposed on Ireland," she writes in "The Big House," "began to wish to add something to life. The security that they had, by the eighteenth century, however ignobly gained, they did not use quite ignobly. They began to feel, and exert, the European idea—to seek what was humanistic, classic and disciplined."

For the full flavor of the Anglo-Irish in their ridin', fishin', and shootin' prime, the reader should turn to the two cousins who published from 1889 to 1949 under the names Somerville & Ross (Edith Somerville continued to regard Martin Ross—the pseudo-

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nym of Violet Martin—as a collaborator even beyond the latter's death in 1915). Somerville & Ross picture an Anglo-Irish ruling class characterized by vigor, *sang-froid*, eccentricity, and a habit of command, at ease with their neighbors among the native Irish. This is a world where a favorite hunting dog wipes his muddy paws on a priceless Oriental rug, where the squire goes on a tear with the poacher. As portrayed in the stories brought together in collections like *Experiences of an Irish R.M.*, the Anglo-Irish played a vital role in their adopted country. The Resident Magistrate of Somerville & Ross's stories adjudicated—often with hilarious results—the disputes of the Catholic majority, while other members of this group functioned in the economy as large farmers, bankers, merchants, and administrators. The never less than outspoken Edith Somerville reprimanded her brother, who had written her that he had come to regard himself as English: "Nonsense about being 'English'! I don't mind if you say 'British' if you like. . . . My family has eaten Irish food and shared Irish life for nearly three hundred years, and if that doesn't make me Irish I might as well say I was Scotch, or Norman, or Pre-Diluvian!"

The attenuation and malaise one feels among Bowen's characters springs, historically, from the growing isolation of the Anglo-Irish in an Ireland increasingly bent on controlling its own destiny and increasingly successful in moving toward that goal. Only four years after Bowen was born, the Wyndham Act—engineered by George Wyndham, Chief Secretary of Ireland at the turn of the century—was passed, enabling landlords to sell their farms to their tenants in transactions financed by the government, with an added Bonus of 12 percent paid by the British Treasury. By 1914 three-fourths of the former tenants had bought the lands they farmed, leaving landlords with only their big houses and a few hundred acres of surrounding land. This put them in the position of being (relatively) rich men living in islands of leisure, with no useful function in the country. "The story is told," writes Mark Bence-Jones, "of how when Wyndham was walking through one of the gaming rooms at Monte Carlo a few years after the passing of his Act, he was greeted by an Irish peer of his acquaintance who pointed to the large pile of counters in front of him and said gratefully: 'George, George, the Bonus!'"

I would not want to claim that such irresponsible attitudes toward the ownership of property in a poor country were typical: in landed or monied classes the socially responsible and the scrupulous always coexist cheek by jowl with the callous and the profligate. *The Last September*, set in 1920 during the Troubles of that period, is Bowen's most sustained look at the predicament of Anglo-Irish big-house people—caught between the nationalist agitation of the Irish, with whom, temperamentally, they feel they had so much in common, and the protection of the British military, whom they really don't like very much. Perhaps because of their hyphenated position between England and Ireland, the Anglo-Irish have produced several masters of the comedy of manners—Oscar Wilde, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and William Trevor among them. Bowen's writings are sprinkled with delicious little moments of social comedy, and the latitude she allowed herself in using the omniscient point of view lets us see into the minds of widely incompatible characters whose thoughts are inaccessible to each other. Here, in *The Last September*, we have a British officer's wife, Mrs. Vermont, and an Irish lady, Mrs. Carey, conversing at a tea and tennis party at a country house called Danielstown:

> "Hoity-toity!" thought Betty Vermont (she never used the expression aloud, as she was not certain how one pronounced it: it was one of her inner luxuries). Turning to Mrs Carey (the Honourable Mrs Carey), who sat on her other side, she said frankly:
>
> "Your scrumptious Irish teas make a perfect piggy-wig of me. And dining-room tea, of course, makes me a kiddy again."
>
> "Does it really?" said Mrs Carey, and helped

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herself placidly to another slice of chocolate cake. She thought of Mrs Vermont as "a little person" and feared she detected in her a tendency, common to most English people, to talk about her inside. She often wondered if the War had not made everybody from England a little commoner. She added pleasantly: "This chocolate cake is a specialty of Danielstown's. I believe it's a charm that they make it by, not a recipe."

"Things do run in families, don't they? Now I am sure you've all got ghosts."

"I can't think of any," said Mrs Carey, accepting another cup of tea . . .

Edith Somerville wrote in *Irish Memories* (1917) of "English people whose honesty and innocence would be endearing, if they were a little less overlaid by condescension." The patronizing tone adopted seemingly unconsciously by the English when speaking of or to the Irish shows no signs of abating even in our own day. The revulsion and hostility occasioned by IRA bombs going off near the Bank of England, by the mortar attacks on Heathrow Airport, are made all the more virulent by the sense that one is being betrayed by people who were considered to be loyally subservient—when, in the language of an older generation of American Southerners, the "good nigger" suddenly and inexplicably becomes the "bad nigger."

Speaking to an Anglo-Irishwoman, Mrs. Vermont will naturally presume that they are both of the same breed, unaware how complicated questions of identity were for the Anglo-Irish, who thought of themselves as Irish, while to their tenants they were "the English." This was brought home to me recently in a conversation with a friend from Connemara whose first language was Irish —a great fan of Elizabeth Bowen's writing. I was speaking to her of the ease with which Bowen used French words in her writing. "Yes of course," my friend said. "That would have been typical for an Englishwoman of her time."

To return to the conversation between Mrs. Vermont and Mrs. Carey, however. Here are the terms in which the English officer's wife commiserates with her Anglo-Irish acquaintance about the armed rebels in the hills above her house:

"All this is terrible for you all, isn't it? I do think you're so sporting the way you just stay where you are and keep going on. Who would ever have thought the Irish would turn out so disloyal—I mean, of course, the lower classes! I remember Mother saying in 1916—you know, when that dreadful rebellion broke out —she said 'This *has* been a shock to me; I never shall feel the same about the Irish again.' You see, she had brought us all up as kiddies to be so keen on the Irish, and Irish songs. I still have a little bog-oak pig she brought me back from an exhibition. She always said they were the most humorous people in the world, and with hearts of gold. Though of course we had none of us ever been in Ireland."

If you add to the isolation common to other members of her class in the twentieth century the peculiar circumstances of Elizabeth Bowen's childhood, you find yourself face to face with an individual perilously, heroically it seems to me, cut off from nurturing influences. Her father, Henry, broke with a family tradition that expected the master of Bowen's Court to live there and manage the affairs of the estate. He studied law, eventually becoming an examiner of landlords' titles for the Irish Land Commission, and set up housekeeping in Dublin. After suffering a nervous breakdown apparently brought on by overwork, Henry Bowen succumbed to a lifelong mental illness. His daughter responded with a "campaign of not noticing," which may be related to the subtlety and indirectness of her fiction: the reader must often follow barely detectable nuances in the development of character and plot. Not uncommonly in Bowen's work, something that is never mentioned—or that is alluded to ten pages later—may be the most important thing that is going on.

"I had come out of the tension and mystery of my father's illness, the apprehensive silence or chaotic shoutings," Bowen would

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later write, "with nothing more disastrous than a stammer." Great artists by definition turn defects into distinctions, and she would turn her speech impediment to advantage. As an internal British Council memo regarding Bowen as a lecturer put it in 1950: "She is a *most* successful lecturer with a *most* successful stammer." With Henry Bowen confined to a mental hospital near Dublin, his wife and daughter left for England, where they bounced from one relative and one rented house to another. In 1912 her mother told her sister-in-law, "I have good news, now I'm going to see what Heaven's like." She had cancer, and she died when Elizabeth was thirteen. As Victoria Glendinning writes in her biography, "One of the words at which her stammer consistently baulked her was 'mother.'"[1]

From her first novel, *The Hotel* (1927), to her last, *Eva Trout* (1968), the isolated or orphaned girl is a recurring character in Bowen's fiction: the girl who lives much of her life in hotels, the girl who gets fobbed off on relatives. In *The Death of the Heart*, Bowen's best-known novel, Portia, the isolated, in-the-way girl, with her outsider's point of view, reminds one of the way Robert Lowell writes of himself as a child: "I wasn't a child at all—/ unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina/ in the Golden House of Nero." The conflict with which *The Death of the Heart* opens is initiated when Portia's sister-in-law, Anna, finds and reads her diary, which contains disturbing though vague comments about Anna and St. Quentin, Anna's presumed lover (I say "presumed" because Bowen is not one to make such relationships explicit). "Fancy her watching me!" St. Quentin exclaims. "What a little monster she must be. And she looks so aloof." Anna responds: "She does not seem to think you are a snake in the grass, though she sees a good deal of grass for a snake to be in. There does not seem to be a single thing that she misses."

Portia Quayne is the daughter of a love-match. Her father, an older man, had fallen in love with Louise—this is his daughter-in-law Anna telling the story—"a scrap of a widow, ever so plucky, just back from China, with damp little hands, a husky voice and defective tear-ducts that gave her eyes always rather a swimmy look." How unerringly, in these thumbnail sketches, Bowen places her characters: "[Louise] had a prostrated way of looking up at you," continues Anna,

> "and that fluffy, bird's-nesty hair that hairpins get lost in. At that time, she must have been about twenty-nine. She knew almost nobody, but, because she was so plucky, someone had got her a job in a flower shop. She lived in a flatlet in Notting Hill Gate. . . . I often think of those dawns in Notting Hill Gate, with Irene leaking tears and looking for hairpins, and Mr. Quayne sitting up denouncing himself. . . . She would not be everyone's money. You may be sure that she let Mr. Quayne know that her little life was from now on entirely in his hands. By the end of those ten days he cannot have known, himself, whether he was a big brute or St. George."

No fool like an old fool, of course, and Mr. Quayne confesses the affair to his wife. "Mrs. Quayne was quite as splendid as ever: she stopped Mr. Quayne crying, then went straight down to the kitchen and made tea." Before he knows it, the poor man has been kicked out of his comfortable country house and finds himself living out the rest of his life on a reduced income with his new little family of three in hotels, pensions, and rented villas in the least fashionable parts of the Riviera. Portia's half-brother and his wife, Anna, take the orphan to live with them after both her parents have died. "A house *is* quiet, after a hotel," Portia tells her brother. "In a way, I am not used to it yet. In hotels you keep hearing other people, and in flats you had to be quiet for fear they should hear you."

Perhaps it is the habit of keeping quiet and listening that has sharpened Portia's attentiveness to the nuances of life in her new

1 *Elizabeth Bowen*, by Victoria Glendinning (Knopf, 1978).

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surroundings. "Mother and I got fond of it, in some ways. We used to make up stories about the people at dinner, and it was fun to watch people come and go." This outsider's point of view—cold-eyed, unillusioned—places Portia beyond the cozy circle of civilized mutual accommodation practiced by Anna and Thomas, and thus makes their visitor a dangerous presence.

What Portia's inner wounds might be, we are never quite sure. Of her mother, the child's constant companion, we learn little, even about the circumstances of her final illness. We only catch a glimpse—poignant for anyone who has ever lived on the cheap in Europe during the off-season—of the last little pension where they lived in Switzerland:

> They always stayed in places before the season, when the funicular was not working yet. . . . Their room, though it was a back room facing into the pinewoods, had a balcony; they would run away from the salon and spend the long wet afternoons there. They would lie down covered with coats, leaving the window open, smelling the wet woodwork, hearing the gutters run. Turn abouts, they would read aloud to each other the Tauchnitz novels they had bought in Lucerne. Things for tea, the little stove and a bottle of violet methylated spirits stood on the wobbly commode between their beds, and at four o'clock Portia would make tea. They ate, in alternate mouthfuls, block chocolate and *brioches*. Postcards they liked, and Irene's and Portia's sketches were pinned to the pine walls.

And finally we see them leaving:

> When they left that high-up village, when they left for ever, the big hotels were just being thrown open, the funicular would begin in another day. They drove down in a fly, down the familiar zigzag, Irene moaning and clutching Portia's hand. Portia could not weep at leaving the village, because her mother was in such pain. But she used to think of it while she waited at the Lucerne clinic, where Irene had the operation and died: she died at six in the evening, which had always been their happiest hour.

In Anna's relations with Thomas Quayne, one guesses there is something of Elizabeth Bowen's own marriage to Alan Cameron, an ex-army officer who bored the London literary crowd—perhaps deliberately, as a way of getting even for being ignored—by telling long war stories. One anecdote that Victoria Glendinning repeats has a guest at a Bowen's Court party, while searching through the old house trying to find a lavatory, opening a door and finding Alan Cameron "alone in a small room eating his supper off a tray." Thomas chafes in his study with a large whiskey while Anna has her *tête-à-têtes* with her friend St. Quentin and the *enfant terrible*, Eddie, whose relationship with Anna is even more equivocal than what the reader gathers about St. Quentin. The situation might remind someone who has read Bowen's biography of Mr. Cameron's complaints about the "Black Hats"—so-called from the rows of men's hats hanging in the hall of their house in Regent's Park when he would come home from his office at the BBC—who visited his wife. A complex and interesting marriage in which "married love" was less a factor than a mutual dependence and affection. "I never saw real strain or needling between them," May Sarton writes, "never for a second. Love affairs were a counterpoint."

Perhaps drawing parallels between marriages, fictional and real, even after husband and wife are dead, is an exercise in frivolous presumption. In *The Death of the Heart*, at any rate, Anna is rattled by her young sister-in-law's observant eye. "I cannot stand being watched. She watches us." Bowen renders the tense accommodation between this man and woman with her own keen eye:

> She posted herself at the far side of the fire, in her close-fitting black dress, with her folded arms locked, wrapped up in tense thoughts. For those minutes of silence, Thomas fixed on her his considering eyes. Then he got up, took her by one elbow and angrily kissed her. "I'm never with you," he said.

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"Well, look how we live."

"The way we live is hopeless."

Anna said, much more kindly: "Darling, don't be neurotic. I have had such a day."

He left her and looked round for his glass again. Meanwhile, he said to himself in a quoting voice: "We are minor in everything but our passions."

"Wherever did you read that?"

"Nowhere: I woke up and heard myself saying it, one night."

"How pompous you were in the night. I'm so glad I was asleep."

In a house galvanized by these tensions only Matchett, the impassive family retainer, one of the best serious portraits of a servant in fiction since Proust's Françoise, has very definite ideas about what is to be done with Portia. And with Bowen's beautifully specific imagination, the details of Matchett's standards ring with authenticity:

> Matchett's ideas must date from the family house, where the young ladies, with bows on flowing horsetails of hair, supped upstairs with their governess, making toast, telling stories, telling each other's fortunes with apple peel. In the home of today there is no place for the miss: she has got to sink or swim. But Matchett, upstairs and down with her solid impassive tread, did not recognize that some tracts no longer exist. She seemed, instead, to detect some lack of life in the house, some organic failure in its propriety. Lack in the Quaynes' life of family custom seemed not only to disorientate Matchett but to rouse her contempt—family custom, partly kind, partly cruel, that has long been rationalised away. In this airy vivacious house, all mirrors and polish, there was no place where shadows lodged, no point where feeling could thicken.

Portia, like Bowen's other orphans, is in dire need of affection, unequipped by her experience with the means to ask for love. She turns to the massively self-controlled Matchett, whose very name tells us how stiff and contained a creature she is. A poignant scene in *The Death of the Heart* has Matchett sitting on Portia's bed, reluctantly drawn into the sort of confidential talk Portia had ought to be having with her sister-in-law if Anna were not so cold:

> "She had a right, of course, to be where I am this minute," Matchett went on in a cold, dispassionate voice. "I've no call to be dawdling up here, not with all that sewing." Her weight stiffened on the bed; drawing herself up straight she folded her arms sternly, as though locking love for ever from her breast. Portia saw her outline against the window and knew this was not pique but arrogant rectitude—which sent her voice into distance two tones away. "I have my duties," she said, "and you should look for your fond-ofs where it is more proper."

Matchett is only one of the servants who appear in Bowen's pages—though a distinction should be made between Irish servants and English servants, in houses and thus in books. Irish people curiously manage to be both egalitarian and hierarchical at the same time. Hierarchical because traces of a feudal society endured perhaps as late as the 1950s on this little island with its bogs and mountains and months of rain. The Middle Ages were slow to disappear in a "land of saints and scholars" and large landholdings where even today, driving through the Irish countryside, the visitor is struck by mile after mile of demesne walls, perforated every so often by baronial gates and Gothic gate-lodges. Egalitarian, perhaps because the Irish are religious people whose church teaches that all souls are equal in the eyes of God.

And perhaps also because the man saddling the horse of his jumped-up Anglo-Irish squire or squireen may have, or fancy he has, noble blood running in his veins. The Kerry poet Egan O'Rahilly (1670–1726), of whom Brendan Kennelly has written, "O'Rahilly *is* a snob, but one of the great snobs of literature," wrote a great contemptuous putdown of the new Cromwellian adventurers who had conquered Ireland and usurped the land of the Irish nobility, using

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the house, as Bowen habitually does, as an emblem of a way of life:

> That royal Cashel is bare of house and guest,
> That Brian's turreted home is the otter's nest,
> That the kings of the land have neither land
> nor crown
> Has made me a beggar before you, Valentine
> Brown.

This is Frank O'Connor's translation from the Irish lament, where O'Rahilly characterizes himself in a haunting synecdoche as "An old grey eye, weeping for lost renown." The last line, in which the English name Valentine Brown would undoubtedly sound even more contemptible in the context of the Gaelic words of the original, recurs as the burden of every stanza in the poem. Kennelly comments: "O'Rahilly himself would have considered 'Valentine' a ridiculous name for anyone calling himself a gentleman, and as for 'Brown,' he would as soon have addressed a 'Jones' or a 'Robinson.'" I mention O'Rahilly and his great poem of hauteur and despair because he lived in the next county over from Elizabeth Bowen's County Cork, and because the people he so eloquently despised were of the same ilk as the Bowens.

Bowen never committed the modern heresy—inspired, I suppose, by what might be called a romantic Marxism—of wanting to become a member of the working class. Servants—or Mrs. Vermont, of the bog-oak pigs and the tendency to talk about her inside—were simply not her social equals. In the eyes of many readers, Americans especially, this makes her a snob. Even as sensible a reader as Elizabeth Bishop, in a letter to Robert Lowell expressing reservations about the Boston poet Anne Sexton, criticizes Bowen for her gentility:

> Anne Sexton I think still has a bit too much romanticism and what I think of as the "our beautiful old silver" school of female writing, which is really boasting about how "nice" *we* were. V. Woolf, E. Bowen, R. West, etc.—they are all full of it. They have to make quite sure that the reader is not going to misplace them socially, first—and that nervousness interferes constantly with what they think they'd like to say.

I think Bishop mostly has it wrong. I would agree with her about Rebecca West, the precariousness of whose family origins and social status I touched on in my essay on her in these pages.[2] On the other hand, Anne Sexton in her poetry never struck me as being out to impress anyone about her social standing, which takes a back seat to her emotional problems and her drinking and drugging. In terms of social standing, Woolf and Bowen had nothing to prove; both wrote within the social context they were born into.

Bowen to a large extent took the world as she found it, and was more interested in her characters as people—with likes and dislikes, and especially with a desperate and often frustrated need for love—than as exemplars of social class. When she writes in "A Love Story" (1939), "Servants love love and money, but the Perry-Durhams bored the servants by now," at first one's radar of political correctness beeps; then one thinks again about the sentence and says, "How true that is!" When politics, as the modern substitute for religion that it has become among what are called in Britain "the chattering classes," arises in Bowen's novels—and it rarely arises—it is seen as a form of emotional desperation. Here is part of an exchange from *The House in Paris* between Karen, who has grave doubts about her impending marriage, and her upper-middle-class Aunt Violet. The time would be the early 1930s.

> "Things one can do have no value. I don't mind feeling small myself, but I dread finding the world is. With Ray I shall be so safe. I wish the Revolution would come soon; I should like to start fresh while I am still young, with everything that I had to depend on gone. I

2 "Rebecca West and the Tragedy of Yugoslavia," *The New Criterion*, June 1992.

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> sometimes think it is people like us, Aunt Violet, people of consequence, who are unfortunate: we have nothing ahead. I feel it's time something happened."
>
> "Surely so much has happened," said Aunt Violet. "And mightn't a Revolution be rather unfair?"
>
> "I shall always work against it," said Karen grandly. "But I should like it to happen in spite of me."

Except for saying she wants to work *against* the Revolution, how much Karen sounds like W. H. Auden at this same time!

The "lack of life" Matchett regretted would not, I suspect, have been found at Bowen's Court when Elizabeth Bowen was mistress there. Something of the insouciance, the gay defiance of adversity, to be found at all levels of Irish society can be seen in Bowen's remark from the essay I have quoted:

> the big house people were handicapped, shadowed and to an extent queered—by their pride, by their indignation at their decline and by their divorce from the countryside in whose heart their struggle was carried on. . . . These big house people admit only one class-distinction: they instinctively "place" a person who makes a poor mouth.
>
> It is, I think, to the credit of big house people that they concealed their struggles with such nonchalance and for so long continued to throw about what did not really amount to much weight. It is to their credit that, with grass almost up to their doors and hardly a sixpence to turn over, they continued to be resented by the rest of Ireland as being the heartless rich.

The strengths of Bowen's big-house people—pluck, style, common sense, decency, and a sense of community—are what several of her orphans and heart-wounded girls yearn for, often without even understanding this. A question Bowen implicitly asks over and over is: What precisely is the emotional damage inflicted on her orphaned heroines (herself included) by the circumstances of their lives? In "The Easter Egg Party" (1940), Hermione, taken in for a long visit in the country by two maiden ladies who are friends of her recently divorced mother, frustrates the ladies' desire to help her. "Their object was to restore her childhood to her," the story begins. But there is some basic human generosity, some sense of give and take, that she has simply missed out on. A spoiled child, she can appreciate things only by owning them: "'I think those lambs are pretty,' said Hermione, suddenly pointing over a wall. 'I should like a pet lamb of my own; I should call it Percy.'" After she demands to leave the sisters' home, seeing that they refuse to cater to her self-centeredness, she leaves a sadness behind her, because they realize her childhood is beyond the power of their wholesome kindness to restore: "The sisters seldom speak of her even between themselves; she has left a sort of scar, like a flattened grave, in their hearts."

As implied by the age and nature of many of her characters, Bowen's novels and stories are songs of innocence and experience. The innocence is not necessarily pure, and the experience may be benign or sinister. In *The House in Paris*, astounded by a lie that the tyrannical Leopold, the illegitimate child of a troubled and unfortunate affair, is willing to tell, Henrietta, the settled, "normal" child, finds herself thinking: "'But we're children, people's belongings: we can't—' Incredulity made her go scarlet . . ." Leopold observes cynically: "Nobody speaks the truth when there's something they must have." Emma, beginning an adulterous affair in "Summer Night" (1941), realizes: "Yes, here she was, being settled down to as calmly as he might settle down to a meal." Portia in *The Death of the Heart*, because she is such a sacrificial lamb, is easy prey for the heartbreaker Eddie, Anna's young protégé. The novel, as its title implies, is almost an allegory, a Unicorn Tapestry in which the "pure"—Portia, Thomas—are victimized by the worldly and corrupt—Anna, St. Quentin, Eddie.

Unstrung by Eddie's betrayal, and disoriented by Anna's rejection of her, Portia takes the extraordinary step of going to the

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decent, avuncular old Major Brutt, a demobbed colonial ex-army officer who is floundering around trying to find his way in the fast-changing Britain of the Thirties, living in an attic room of a cheap hotel in the Cromwell Road. After she has told the Major how unhappy she is with her brother and sister-in-law, he asks quietly what she wants to do:

> "Stay here with you," she said. "You do like me," she added. "You write to me; you send me puzzles; you say you think about me. . . . I could do things for you: we could have a home; we would not have to live in a hotel. . . . I could cook; my mother cooked when she lived in Notting Hill Gate. Why could you not marry me? I could cheer you up. I would not get in your way, and we should not be half so lonely."

Eva Trout, the rich young heiress and title character of Bowen's last, rather odd, and not very satisfactory novel, buys through the mail, in a similar effort to settle herself, a seaside house—sight unseen. When she descends on the small town to take possession, she startles the real-estate agent by her rather mad-seeming peremptoriness.

> "Now," she announced, looking round for her charioteer, "I want to go home."
> "*Home?*" cried he, fearing all was lost.
> "Where is my house?"

Ireland and England, house and hotel, innocence and experience, the child and the world—these are the boundaries between which Elizabeth Bowen's fiction runs its supple and sinuous course. With a touch of the worldly French moralist, she is fond of delivering maxims reminiscent of Madame de Sévigné. In thinking about the way she mediates between her classic polarities, one might ponder the following formulation from the last part of *The Death of the Heart*: "Happy that few of us are aware of the world until we are already in league with it."

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Poems *by Donald Justice, Judith Baumel & William Kistler*

Variations on Baudelaire's "La Servante au grand coeur"

That servant with the big heart but so clumsy—
Remember her?—how objects used to fly
Out of her hands, seized by a sudden whimsy?
And often it would end in a good cry,
Things shattering around her, glass and cup,
Dust where she dusted, spots where she wiped up . . .

She meant no real harm, only . . . only
I used to picture her in that cramped room
(The size of a coffin), sinking down in gloom
To wail into her pillow, terribly lonely,
And needing us (we thought) to give some meaning
To her poor life beyond the daily cleaning.

Well, she has gone without us; she has gone
To cross the rivers of the underworld alone.

October's here. It whistles through the orchard.
The leaves blush and are humble at our feet.
So much like Bertha—whom we teased and tortured
As children all those years.
And what if we should meet

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Some evening in the shadows of the hall
To find her shrinking back into the wall
Just as she used to, so that we might pass,
Only this time she vanishes like smoke?
And what if we should dream the sound of glass
Breaking, but find no sign of it when we awoke?

* * *

Three weeks have passed. We should at least have brought
Some flowers for the grave, but no one thought.
Too late, in any case, for she must be
Too wan and hollow-eyed by now to see,
Nor would there be a friend left to replace
The worn-out flowers in their little vase.

—*Donald Justice*

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And Boaz begat Obed,
and Obed begat Jesse,
and Jesse begat David

So come to the planting ground, come,
come to the fields of abundance,
the sheaves that I let fall of purpose,
Come that the bright constant grasses of perennial
corn should mix its pikes and tassels,
that a husk should burst with bountiful rows.
Come to the threshing floor, come,
come that the corn which we winnow and eat
be made sweet and productive.
Come that I might spread my skirt over you,
that an August afternoon of cut grasses,
wildflowers, pines and oaks might know clouds
the white of seraphim, generous and wise.
Come to the many greens of the far hills
shifted in rippling shadow and exchange
beneath a sun coupling with those clouds,
that a full moon buffeted in a night
of quicksilver blue should stand
a sentinel of grace and fear.
And to corn that names the fruit of all
edible grasses, the inheritance we redeem,
bring your yellow, still, silent, dawn.

—Judith Baumel

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Music from an evening sphere

The sun stood, then imperceptibly turned,
moved further away behind the dark
pouring of the river, behind the sonorous
chords of the Palisades, the almost
touchable silence of the marsh and tidal

flats. She also stood and this time sang,
her face uncovered and coming forward
as though it were a room being opened
to light, her two eyes leading inward

like infinite lives lying in parallel.
I understood she might hold each strand
of my racial memory, depth of body
and depth of heart. A seeking deeper
than the waters of the flowing river

rose up within me, sent a whispering
out over the radiance of her presence.
An intercellular waking filled every
point between us. The sun stepped further,

drew her voice off into the approaching
train of night. I went home through streets
which held the last inscriptions of light.
I opened a door. Her face was standing
in the mottled shadows where I entered.

—*William Kistler*

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Art

Redon: the subjective world

by Deborah Rosenthal

To get at the nature of Odilon Redon's genius requires us to look at his whole career, the three and a half decades of which were divided into two distinct phases. From 1880, when he began showing at the age of forty, to about the early 1890s, Redon worked almost exclusively in black-and-white, on the prints and drawings that he called his *noirs*, and seems to have produced little if any painting. By about 1890, he had begun painting regularly in oil and distemper, and drawing in full-color pastel, and from then until his death in 1916 his output was predominantly in color. Redon's statement that "a truly sensitive artist does not find the same invention in different materials, because he is affected by them differently" seems meant to underscore the variety and multiplicity of his metaphors.

The more familiar Redon is the inventor of those strange images of his first phase—the detached and floating eyes, the eye-balloon, the long-legged, toothily grinning spider's head, the skeleton-homunculus sprouting branches—executed in the most luscious range of grays and blacks ever produced in charcoal and lithography. Although it is much less likely that one will have seen work from Redon's later, color phase, there, too, he is an artist who has been known by a signature image or images—the so-called "*Yeux Clos*" (a bust head with closed or semi-closed eyes) or a single centrally placed vase holding a profuse bouquet of flowers. As the sum of all these isolated images, Redon's career seems to bifurcate into the work of two artists, of quite disparate natures: indeed, thumbing through reproductions of his works arranged in chronological order, one might think that Redon was a Symbolist who later settled down, or just settled. Against the backdrop of the large movements of art from the last century into our own, the internal shifts of this artist's unusual career may seem obscure. As a result, his reputation stands divided; famous as the maker of a few memorable images, he is mostly still unknown as an artist.

Over the past ten years or so, scholars and curators at some major institutions have shown a new interest in Redon. In 1988, the Ian Woodner collection of works by Redon was shown at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.; last year, some of the prints and a couple of the paintings were shown at the Drawing Center in New York. The artist's autobiographical volume, *To Myself*, came out in English in 1986; a scholarly book called *The Temptation of Saint Redon*, by Stephen F. Eisenman, was published two years ago.[1] And earlier this year we were given, at last, a large exhibition of almost two hundred works—accompanied

1 *The Temptation of Saint Redon: Biography, Ideology, and Style in the "Noirs" of Odilon Redon*, by Stephen F. Eisenman; University of Chicago Press, 289 pages, $55.

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by a huge illustrated catalogue—at the Art Institute of Chicago.[2]

For admirers of Redon's art, what is most important about this renewal of interest is that now, in these new exhibitions and publications, we can see a number of Redons at one time, compare *noirs* to paintings, and become acquainted with works other than the most familiar ones: at last, we can describe the contours of the whole artist. Certainly the curators of the Chicago show meant to present the totality of Redon's career. The sheer volume of works in the show bespoke this effort, as did the unusual arrangement of the galleries, where instead of a purely chronological sequence of rooms we saw many and various ways to group the works. Although I disagreed with some of the curators' choices of works, and also wished that the show had been edited down to a smaller and more selective one, in almost every room I found thrilling pictures. And, making one's way through the path of those pictures, one could discern within the bulk of the show the shape of a career whose depth and range are those of a great artist.

The prospect of reading new writing about Redon was exciting as well: the exhibition catalogue, a volume composed of several essays by a variety of writers, copiously illustrated not only with Redons but also with associated imagery, followed by less than a year Eisenman's book-length examination of the *noirs*. I know that Eisenman and the Chicago authors don't agree on their interpretation of Redon, but both, I think, take approaches to Redon's art that in the end disappoints by depending too much on what is external to the works themselves. This is not a new temptation for writers about Redon; I was reminded, reading these new texts, of the adjective that the painter André Masson preferred for Redon: "elusive." Some forty years ago, on the occasion of a similar major Redon retrospective in Paris, Masson wrote a wonderful essay for *Art News* called "Redon: Mystique with a Method" in which he tried to extract Redon the essential painter from the clutches of writers who would make him into a Breton-style Surrealist. Thus Masson the early modernist (and surrealist) rejected context as the ultimate interpreter.

Today the pendulum has in some sense swung back. Postmodern contextualizers, among whom I would number Eisenman and the writers of the Chicago catalogue, have fashioned a different but no less cumbersome carapace for Redon's work to bear on its back, this one made out of nineteenth-century facts. There are so many! and they are so interesting!—but finally the reader must ask whether they offer the key to the work that the writers want them to offer. What all these writers would like to get at, of course, is what distinguishes Redon from his contemporaries—the essence of his genius—but to do so they have marshaled a huge amount of information about the world he lived in. It's as if they think that Redon's essence, his genius, could be discovered merely by citing enough things to which he might have responded in his time and his place. The trouble with this approach is evident in the books themselves; worse, it was evident in the exhibition itself. There we were offered that strange hybrid creature that is the-work-and-the-life, the meanings of both horribly intercut and intermingled so that, even on the wall, the work never stood alone: the curators' commentary was right there on a label.

Such an approach has rather obvious utility when the writer begins with a bias, as it seems to me Eisenman does. The "temptation of St. Redon" of Eisenman's curious title is derived from an episode in Redon's life when the old, long-married artist confessed a crush on a young woman of his ac-

2 "Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams 1840–1916" was on view at the Art Institute of Chicago from July 2 through September 18, 1994. It can now be seen at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (October 21, 1994–January 15, 1995), and it will travel to the Royal Academy of Arts, London (February 22–May 21, 1995). A catalogue, edited by Douglas W. Druick, has been published by the three participating museums in association with Harry N. Abrams (464 pages, $60; $39.95 paper).

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quaintance. Most of the book is based on Eisenman's interest in Redon's *noirs* as testimony to the socio-political realities of his day, and some of this discussion is quite interesting and may even bear on the work. But when Redon ceases to work in the graphic medium, which is so readily connected to print and, by extension, to ideas (and even to political action, perhaps), Eisenman drops all consideration of the work itself. Since the achievement of the *noirs* is to Eisenman's mind a triumph of correct thinking, the patent change in Redon's mode of expression leaves the author without a handle on two-thirds of the career. The sardonic "St. Redon" becomes his handle—a phrase from a contemporary letter gossiping about Redon which Eisenman uses as a sort of dishonest piece of "evidence" to bolster his case for the silliness and impotence, as it were, of the old man's Technicolor fantasies. Eisenman reveals himself to be a Puritan who believes wholeheartedly that the sensuousness of Redon's color gets in the way of his more important concerns (that is, his politics). Eisenman's comment on Redon's late work is, finally, a sneer.

The curators and catalogue writers for the Chicago show, nineteenth-century contextualizers themselves, were, I think, made uneasy by Eisenman—for they do admire Redon. (No one incapable of admiring his art could have put together the marvelous first room of the show, a grouping of masterpieces, both black-and-white and color, spanning the career.) The Chicago approach, unlike Eisenman's, had a multiple focus—different writers, with different aspects of the career to examine, viewed Redon through various lenses. But throughout, the carapace of facts felt like a drag on the work. I will give only one example from the catalogue. In Chicago, Redon was also given a name culled from period documents—the much nicer "Prince of Dreams"—and here too the period name is meant to serve as a rubric. This "dreamer" is to be psychoanalyzed: seizing on the fact that Redon often referred to his isolation as a child—he was sent to live away from his parents to lead what he remembered later as a highly solitary life on their country estate—the catalogue leads the reader through an astonishingly long (and straightfaced) discussion of what the "physiological etiology" of this banishment may have been. In all of this, the sensations of being alone that Redon meant to convey to us are totally lost, and with them something key to his work and the nature of his invention.

I could draw many, many more examples from the catalogue text, but in Chicago, where text and teaching pursued the work right into the exhibition, the curators' contextualizing could affect viewers who never even opened the catalogue. Some of what the curators felt we had to know insulted the viewer's intelligence—in the *Birth of Venus*, we were told by the wall label, a shell and succulent flower "both have obvious sexual allusions." Sometimes the curators second-guessed Redon—a cloud became a "personal symbol" or a color represented only a particular emotion. The problem with this approach was most evident to me, though, in the way it led the curators, people of good intentions, to commit two atrocities on work they admire. In one of the first galleries, a signed print was hung upside down to demonstrate the derivation of its imagery from the earlier print beside it. I thought this hanging the worst result of the curators' approach—until I reached the middle gallery of the exhibition. In this room were several showcases filled with scientific specimens from Chicago museums, just the sort of natural-history specimens—butterflies, shells, fossil forms, etc.—that Redon himself might have seen in nineteenth-century collections and that, of course, correspond in type to some of the parts of entities he concocts in his pictures. Here, finally, was what all the contextualizing led to—scientific "proof" required to validate imagination. In this gallery I, at least, found myself feeling as bewildered as one of the children in Dickens's *Hard Times* when their schoolmaster, Mr. Gradgrind, pushes their eager speculations into the Utilitarian vise with the phrase "Nothing but Facts!"

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My disappointment with this way of looking at Redon leads me to think that, in general, we must stop asking the question "What is the work *about*?"—or, even, "What is the career about?" (In Chicago I overheard museumgoers, inspired by wall commentary suggesting that Redon's color work was the byproduct of a kind of psychological liberation, asking each other what permitted Redon to switch to color, or rather kept him from it to begin with.) "What is the work about?" is the question contemporary artists are always being asked, and perhaps the gobbledygook the public sometimes gets back in return is inevitable: the question, after all, resounds very little with what an artist concerns himself with. In the studio, the artist sets himself problems. How, if you are Redon, do you compare two entities—say, a butterfly and a flower, or Christ and a serpent—in such a way that the two forms turn on themselves or open into greater and greater spaces, becoming a third entity in the process? How do you get two completely different paint surfaces, one matte and the other shiny, one heavily globbed-on and the other thinly painted, to read as different kinds of forces operating within a single continuum of space? How do you allow a single color to infuse an entire composition without losing the dynamism of composition—color movement—to the stasis of mere design? The answers to these questions, and to many other questions we could raise about Redon and about the work of contemporary artists, are the pictures themselves.

Redon himself said as much. Faced with a questionnaire about his work and processes from his well-meaning but Gradgrindian biographer Andries Bonger, he wrote back plaintively, "What good is it to reveal anything but the result?" (The Chicago curators quote this but they do not believe it—at least not of the work of an artist who started out in the nineteenth century.) These days, exhibitions and their catalogues, whether on nineteenth-century artists or our contemporaries, are overcrowded with nouns—information heaped up "about" (and "around") the work. Works of art that are alive, whether they are old or new, are *verbs*—processes of becoming. The questions we miss in publications and shows like the recent ones on Redon begin with "how": instead of identifying the things in his dreams, we should try to figure out how he meant us to dream them with him.

Though the catalogue warns us away from Redon's autobiographical volume *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art, and Artists*, a book supposedly tainted by questionable facts and the involvement of Redon's widow in the compilation of its contents, I agree with André Masson, who advises us to read the artist's "beautiful book" in order to know what the artist himself felt we should know about his life. Redon refused Bonger's effort to explain away the poetic contents of his metaphors, but in *To Myself* he does, if perhaps reluctantly, take up the effort to point to the nature of their connection to the circumstances of his life. In an unadorned prose, he lays out his childhood years in the Médoc region of France and his subsequent development into a young artist. The truth any artist might recognize in his account lies in his description of the way it feels to respond to the pleasure one has in the world by making things up. Redon writes: "I spent hours, or later the whole day, stretched out on the grass, in the deserted places of countryside, watching the clouds pass, following with infinite pleasure the magical brightness of their fleeting variations." A curator or scholar who deplored the lack of arcana in those lines might instead note their similarity in spirit to passages in the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, the visionary artist Redon himself admired most.

The young idler whose first fancies were projected into the clouds over Peyrelebade turned into the artist who, as he recalled that earlier self, looked back from a mature *oeuvre* whose invention went from severed heads on blocks to man-sized spiders to enigmatic panoramas of underwater forms to flowers in vases to stained-glass windows and mythical figures. His overarching ideas—I don't

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mean his subjects—had to do with the action of forces rather than the arrangement of things; with states of consciousness rather than the record of actions. Reverie, the precondition of all his works, is Redon's way of being in the world, not taking his leave from it. Although Huysmans set Redon into his novel *Against Nature*, the fantasist painter does not in fact fit the role of decadent. Through his abiding admiration for Corot, a painter humble before nature, Redon is connected to a modern's idea of nature as teacher. The isolation of Redon's early years, his description of which is rooted in the pastoral, puts him into nature as an autogenous being among other autogenous entities, both actor and acted upon, able to see correspondences throughout nature as the well-spring of his visions both lyrical and grotesque. The single tree that Corot recommends young painters to go and study with a pencil day after day could as well be the face in the mirror. Solitude is the apprenticeship in what Redon called the "subjective world."

Redon was, I believe, an artist whose artistic yearnings were fairly clear to him long before he could satisfy them on paper or canvas. He emerged with an exhibition of a group of his great *noirs* only at the age of forty, in 1880. In his early muteness (he would later become a prolific artist) he reminds me of Paul Klee, who was in some ways his artistic descendant. Also a slow beginner whose mature style emerges when he is about forty, Klee notes to himself in an early diary, "Why hurry when you want so much?" I think, too, that, much as Klee seemed to work out many of his ideas in the graphic media, Redon unfolded his ideas first, including many of his formal solutions, in the *noirs*. A visionary art is an art of comparisons, and it is by drawing that artists literally give shape to the exaggerations and correspondences from which they derive the motifs of such an art.

Thus in Redon's *noirs* we see for the first time enormous human heads conflated with heavenly bodies; a head conflated with the round body of a spider; a huge ball, seemingly of stone, juxtaposed with a round bald head; a bulging human eye conflated with a balloon; and so forth. These are only examples drawn from the possibilities of a sphere, one of Redon's most fruitful early motifs. Even earlier, as a student landscapist, Redon had tended toward enigma—trying to draw clearly an emptiness or an anonymous form. Thus his discovery of the indirect processes of printmaking must have seemed particularly apt. Since one must work on a print additively or incrementally—intensifying a dark, say, by first establishing strokes in one direction, printing the area, then adding strokes in another direction—the relationship of parts to the whole is constantly being reconsidered. His mastery of light and dark through this indirect process gave him, finally, a way to invent rather than imitate. Like Dürer's *Melancholia*, which Redon loved, many of the *noirs* include unnatural light sources—an aura around a head which irradiates the area around it, for instance—or an overall radiance seemingly owed to no single source; sometimes, both. The sum of what Redon achieved in the *noirs* was nothing less than a conquering of color—a freeing of color, in the media of black-and-white, from descriptive or naturalistic purposes.

Given that achievement, it is interesting to wonder why he he ultimately abandoned working in the black-and-white graphic medium in the 1890s. It is clear to me that Redon saw himself, always, as a painter—his primary heroes were painters, and his early ambitions were toward painting. But a failed effort at oil painting that was included in the Chicago show—a greasy work of 1882 called *Distributor of Crowns*—shows that when he turned to a full palette, he really did not know at first how to translate into color what he has accomplished in black-and-white. What he had done was genre-breaking: inventive as the *noirs* may seem as a sort of literary adding-up of images (which is how the Chicago writers see them), they are really much more radical as pictorial emptyings-out. Redon is able to set aside the con-

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ventional strategy of starting a picture as a total space: he begins instead from a formal appositeness—the reciprocity of two curved but opposing contours, or the different but equivalent rhythms of two surfaces built from various kinds of strokes of the charcoal, or simply the contrast between a white luminosity and a dark one.

This desperate approach to his materials—he would risk everything to build the metaphor—makes Redon a revolutionary, but also may help to explain his slow approach to color. He would have to search in the paint itself to reinvent his ideas in color. Some of what he began to figure out as he began to paint was how to get a large field of chromatic color (hue, rather than tonal color) to hold the entire pictorial space within itself; how to use the drawn line, and what kind of drawn line could work under and through the sheets of color. There were only a few places around him to look for answers—perhaps a bit to Gauguin; to Moreau, too, perhaps, for the idea of spots or constellations of color. Masson suggests that Monticelli shares Redon's role as a pioneer in the unusual handling of surfaces as texture. If we look at them as formal problems, it is possible to see the continuities between the *noirs* and the color pictures. Surely the later metaphors sometimes feel quite different from the earlier ones, but Redon—like the later genre-confounding artists Klee and Masson—revolves around images, re-setting them, finding new means of comparison, of transformation.

When the later Redon devises the brilliant vases of flowers posed on a table-less ground tone, he reinvents the earlier Redon's metaphor of the mysterious light limning a void; when the later Redon paints the Cyclops as all eye, poised over an embankment sheltering a tiny woman, he paints the two zones of the picture with different kinds of paint surfaces, reconfiguring the earlier Redon's *noir* juxtaposing the textures and similar shapes of eye and pine knot. If Redon's color seems finally to arrive all at once, in a rush of outrageousness, as if he had been holding his breath and let it out all at once, perhaps it is because he had realized at last that he could continue to proceed in color as he had in the *noirs*—from nothing *but* formal relationships, in color *and* the drawn line.

The "subjective world" of Redon's color turns out to be devised as a kind of cross-section between the matter-of-factness of his drawing and the power of color to sweep everything before it. Perhaps it is having hit upon this equilibrium in his pictorial means that enabled Redon to create both the mythologically based pictures, such as *Apollo in His Chariot* or the great *Cyclops*, and the many, many late flower paintings. Position in the plane substitutes for spatial, even temporal, location in Redon's pictures; rarely does he arrange the configuration of the plane symmetrically, since to introduce movement to the intrinsically still parallel planes of color, asymmetry is necessary. In the 1912 *Apollo*, a large canvas 163 centimeters long, all colored in one mottled honey tone, Apollo stands, tiny in his chariot, just to the right and below the middle of the painting; one shining strand of his reins stretches up, a hypotenuse, to the four stamping horses in the upper left. The location—an empty plane of modulated tones—becomes a charged one—an irradiated heaven. Redon can, without linear divisions, without attaching any form to the edges of the rectangle, draw us to it as an entity in time and space that is completed by its links to fellow forms rather than by its story line. Each thing—Apollo in his chariot, the horses, and the edge of the sort of cliff they rear up against—takes its own closed graphic form; but it is the plane of color, unified through tone, that keeps the time-space continuum that is the picture from falling apart into separate narrative entities.

Redon's famous bouquets are all set off-center in rectangles that are just washes of parallel color, always drawn without the interruption of the perpendicular of any tabletop. This ordinary subject, which Redon painted over and over again, becomes (in the successful ones) something explosive. In these pictures, it isn't just a matter of his getting an ensemble of perfect tones—though

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he often does, whether he has invented the bouquet or painted it from life (he did both). Looked at closely, the flower paintings and pastels have nothing of the elisions and abbreviations that paintings of an observed bouquet have. Rather, each flower and leaf or grouping is delineated, often with black crayon as well as pigment, and with a trillion kinds of lines: I was amazed to see, in the pastels, groups of small curlicued lines, scratched lines, dots, and more. The group becomes less a singular entity, more a series of botanical studies in which each flower is being compared with the others in terms of its trajectory from bloom to death. There is nothing stylized in the bouquet's representation.

Redon's color is invented, non-naturalistic color, surprising and surprisingly saturated color. This sort of palette, which inevitably partakes of a relish for pure sensation, seems to disturb some viewers who might more readily accept it within the Mediterraneanism of Matisse or Bonnard. But aside from its acknowledged affinities with the heightened, decorative color of Gauguin (Redon's admirer and sometime defender), Redon's color is so far-out that it catapults him right out of the context of the Post-Impressionist generation and places him in the company of, on the one hand, the Byzantine mosaicists and, on the other hand, the great twentieth-century abstract colorists. And, a bit like the Byzantines or, say, Kandinsky, Redon the color extremist is nevertheless an artist of rather grave demeanor. His pictures, though small (rarely over three feet high), are no more intimate than the Chi-Rho page of the Book of Kells. They are experiences of inwardness offered up to the viewer.

Redon's astonishing color is bound to the great challenge he makes to any kind of traditional pictorial construction. Redon's compositions (the "contents" of which are often just one or two shapes juxtaposed in a sort of arbitrary placement within the rectangle) replace the architectonics of planar construction with a metaphysics of color densities. In Chicago, with so many good and great Redons lining the walls, I felt almost as if pictures were bursting into flames as I came to them. Large fields and spots of saturated cobalt blue, a brilliant enamel-like green, a biting purple cover large parts of the surface, articulated, with a plain, discrete line, into the closed shapes of heads, garlands of flowers, a chalice. The demeanor of the heads, which offer their profiles or three-quarter views, may be grave or even quiescent at times, but with their imminence, Redon has ripped away any planar construction of a space that would hold distance, physical and psychic, between us and them. Redon's staring-back-at-us eyes (including the huge one that dominated the wonderful Cyclops painting in the Chicago show), even perhaps the half-closed eyes of the numerous versions of *Yeux Clos*, are there to dislocate us from viewer to *semblable*. Modeling is not present, but the colors that are identified with the surface are worked, constructed at the molecular level, as it were; the simple juxtaposition of two major similar shapes (head and garland, for example, head-and-shoulders and chalice, for another) we experience as an orbit between different densities of paint; that is, different locations; that is, separate aspects or moments of one continuum.

One of the good things about a big show like the one in Chicago is that there is room for themes and variations. Two of the best color works in the show were variations on a theme that Redon had worked on in the *noirs* as well: a window. The two works I am thinking of—*The Window*, a pastel of 1905, and *The Window*, an oil on canvas painted two years later—both represent only the window itself: it is the Gothic tracery in both, and the oil painting's rose-window design, that tell us that these are church, or cathedral, windows.

In the pastel, the framing of the window is indicated in the luminous black tones; "through" the window ("in" the window?) we see shapes with indefinite contours but very strong color—yellow, red-orange, and, dominantly, a strong purple-blue. They are suggestive, but *only* suggestive, of the con-

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tours of a vague landscape. In the oil painting, on the other hand, the tracery shapes of the rose window enclose clearly defined spots of brilliant color—going from red in the small peripheral shapes to a greenish blue at the center. Framing the glass itself, and below it, greenish gray tones render the stone of a wall; the small triangle in the lower corner of the canvas, a detail of a sculpted Pietà. The luminescent tones of both pictures are amazing (and unconveyable in a catalogue reproduction, apparently). They combine the thinness of an almost modest surface with the weight and force of the most highly saturated hues.

These are works that spiral us back through Redon's career. Think of them not (as some would have us think of them) as connected to the Church, or the ideas of the Church or the Catholic revival of the period, but as latter-day variations on the mysterious windows that are some of the greatest of his *noir* images. Like those earlier windows, these colored ones seem to be about nothing much that is of the material world (even the Pietà and its associations are tiny). And so for anyone who can see the connection between Redon and a modern metaphoric abstract art, these are the works of Redon to go and study. They are *essential* Redon.

But Redon also wrote about Pissarro and his dictum "Go paint an apple." In the exhibition was one of the two tabletop still lifes Redon painted in 1901—a white cloth on a table, with, in one case, a lemon and a pepper on the cloth, and, in the other, a pitcher, a plate, and four vegetables. Painted with a dry but not an inelegant brush, these pictures are more enigmatic than anything else in his *oeuvre*, since they suggest a retreat from the fantastic, the dream, the myth—the infinite. One could be afraid of their all too clear boundaries, their delimitation of a world that seems less full than the world of dreams. Who wants to paint an apple? Redon didn't, very often; but when he did so, he made it as much an expression of inwardness as anything else he painted. These still lifes don't offer themselves as ensembles of light, or surface, or action in a circumscribed area of volumes; they are as if projected, plainly, onto the sky of the tabletop. I don't think these are great paintings, but they do not seem false. And when I return to the Windows, part of the marvel I see in them is the way the metaphor of the window—seeing through compared to seeing within; light as the agent of both—is inseparable from the gorgeousness of color within the paint surface. That is all these pictures have in them; there is nothing there that is redundant or extraneous to the completeness of emotion they express. From the grotesques of the *noirs* to the still lifes to the mythical figures to the Windows, Redon shows us that there is no particular matter to his art at all, its reality no "realism." In the two Windows, everything is there to induce in us exactly the state of the painter—an ecstatic reverie. The matter of Redon's metaphors is something that can be gotten at, approximately, by research; their effect as paintings, though, is to take us, through them, to an exact truth.

Exhibition notes

"Rem Koolhaas
and the Place of Public Architecture"
at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
November 3, 1994–January 31, 1995

The Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, founder of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (O.M.A.) in Rotterdam, is best known in America for his remarkable book *Delirious New York* (1978). A manifesto in celebration of the urban density of Manhattan, which the fifty-year-old Koolhaas calls the culture of congestion and finds "exhilarating," it begins with the startling premise that Manhattan is actually an urban-design masterpiece, one without a genius. That its concentrated mythical splendor exists at all, Koolhaas contends, is proof of an unformulated theory too revolutionary to ever be openly stated—that human beings flourish ever so well in a heavily populated, nature

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free, totally man-made world. Places to thrive include the Waldorf Astoria, the Empire State Building, Rockefeller Center, and the United Nations. To be sure, Harlem is outside the boundaries of the packed utopia.

Delirious New York has been reissued by the Monacelli Press to coincide with this exhibition of Koolhaas's recent work at the Museum of Modern Art. Although New York City has been displaced at MOMA by the European and Japanese cities in which Koolhaas has recently done major work—Paris, Lille, Melun-Sénart; Rotterdam, Karlsruhe, and Yokohama—Koolhaas's sixteen-year-old book provides the rationale for the exhibition. Its curator, Terence Riley, believes with Koolhaas that the chaotic city is a survivor, and in no need of being seen as a problem to be mitigated by the imposition here and there of more spacious, classically ordered, traditional pre-industrial city forms. Koolhaas's urban forms are fragmented, scattered, punctuated by rows of towers and bound together by great swirls of highway and railway infrastructure, penetrated at many levels by an almost Piranesian network of pedestrian pathways and by random and residual-seeming public open spaces and parks.

His buildings are resolutely modernist. Although he began his practice in 1974, at the beginning of the era in which postmodern architecture was to become ascendant, he scorned the movement's reintroduction of direct historic quotation and pastiche. Dedicated instead to the modernism of the Fifties, Koolhaas wished to reinvigorate the style, which led him to the sadly short-lived early-1920s work of the Russian Constructivists—an influence that still shapes and refines his architecture. The exhibition is a handsomely arranged collection of photographs, models, and drawings of projects actually built, architectural competition runners-up, and master plans for urban and regional development at a scale that challenges the many who disagree with turn-of-the-century Chicago architect Daniel H. Burnham's advice to make no small plans. Those who believe that city-building should happen slowly and incrementally, with emphasis upon preservation and adaptive re-use of existing districts and structures, will be out of sympathy with the exhibition's most beautifully presented but controversial project—the International Business Center in Lille, France, for which Koolhaas designed the master plan, the public spaces, and the most spectacular building of the complex: Congrexpo, a gargantuan exposition and convention center.

Lille, a former mining and textile city unable to replace its lost industries, suffered benign neglect and moldered picturesquely until the city fathers, the French government, and eager developers realized that its position, near the exit of the new tunnel between England and the Continent, and consequent importance as a nodal point of TGV, the French superfast train system network, put the place within an hour and a half's traveling distance of fifty million Western Europeans. Koolhaas produced a grand plan that consists of 800,000 square meters of urban activities—shopping, offices, parking, a new TGV station, hotels, housing, concert hall, and Congrexpo—the last recently completed and displayed at MOMA by a magnificent model. Koolhaas's exhibition notes for the convention center are revelatory. "There is an event planned for 1996: all the Mazda dealers of Europe are there; the doors are closed. The new model is driven through Expo; the doors open and it comes into the auditorium. The doors close; the dealers descend to the arena and throng around the car. In the meantime, the entire space of Expo is filled with 5,000 new Mazdas. The doors open; the dealers are guided to their own new Mazdas and drive out of the building. That event will take place in the space of 30 minutes." Exhilarating. Koolhaas's vision understandably is not without enemies. French intellectuals who have rejoiced at the failure of Euro-Disney hope that Euralille will have the same fate. Those architects and planners who have begun to believe in grand plans again, however, would like to see it work.

—*Mildred Schmertz*

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"Jess: A Grand Collage, 1951–1993"
at the Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York. September 21–December 4, 1994

The California-based artist known as Jess has been called one of the best-kept secrets in the art world. While he doesn't have the name recognition of an Andy Warhol, Jess is not unknown in art circles. His work can be found in the collections of major museums, and he has his eloquent supporters, among them the poet John Ashbery. Nevertheless, visitors to the artist's retrospective at the Whitney will find much about the exhibition that is secretive. Indeed, the work—an amalgam of Dada and Surrealism beholden to neither—is so obsessive and private that comparisons to the more bizarre permutations of folk art are not inappropriate.

Born Burgess Collins in 1923, Jess became an artist after a dream convinced him to abandon a career as a chemist. In 1949 he enrolled in the California School of Fine Arts, where he studied with Clyfford Still and David Park. While Jess shares Still's visionary tendencies and Park's obsession with physical surfaces, his *oeuvre*—his collages and, in particular, his series of paintings called "Translations"—has little precedent in twentieth-century art.

The collages—or, as Jess prefers them to be called, "paste-ups"—are made up of innumerable images culled from a variety of sources: anatomical diagrams, pin-ups, reproductions of famous paintings, and jigsaw-puzzle pieces give only an indication of what the paste-ups contain. By their very inclusiveness, they suggest a philosophical summation of cosmic proportions. As art, however, they are cluttered. It is pointless to discuss the work in terms of composition because there is none to speak of: there are just a lot of pictures stuck together. One of the pleasures of collage is the friction generated by disparate materials being joined. But how much pictorial tension can be mustered when a surfeit of imagery cancels itself out?

Jess's best collages keep it simple. *Tricky Cad, Case 1* (1954), a cut-and-paste takeoff on the comic strip "Dick Tracy," is mildly diverting, capturing the nonsensical jolt that art students love about Dada. The evocative *Game's Up* (1981)—a jigsaw-puzzle landscape populated by roving dogs, flying headlights, and a boy playing checkers—is Jess's masterpiece. Here the fragments of different puzzles cohere through a unified space, providing a stable backdrop for Jess's fantastic juxtapositions.

The "Translations," oil-on-canvas versions of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century photographs and engravings, are Jess's attempts at (in the artist's own words) "resurrecting images." Painted in a style not unlike that of paint-by-numbers sets, they are carefully delineated with hard, bright colors on top of gratuitously lumpy grounds. Each of the images is related to a literary text, a wall label of which accompanies the piece. The labels are provided, one supposes, in order to make the work accessible. (On the afternoon I visited the Whitney, viewers spent more time reading the labels than looking at the art.) But obscurantist illustration (which is, ultimately, what the "Translations" are) isn't accessible, nor is it meant to be. Fetishes aren't meant to be accessible, either.

There can be no doubting the sincerity of Jess's vision. Compare his "Translations" to the compendiums of ersatz kitsch seen regularly in SoHo and one can glean the difference between an original and a horde of dilettantes. Yet, as singular as Jess's achievement is, it is also a narrow one. Viewers leaving "A Grand Collage" will be convinced of the work's sincerity. But only those who mistake hermeticism for profundity will find it compelling as art.

"Jess: A Grand Collage, 1951–1993" was organized by Michael Auping for the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, where it was seen from September 12 through October 31, 1993. It has traveled to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. A catalogue has been published by the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy (248 pages, $75; $45 paper).

—Mario Naves

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Theater

It's the theater that got small

by Mark Steyn

"Andrew Lloyd Webber's music is everywhere," sniffed Malcolm Williamson, Master of the Queen's Musick, in 1992, "but then so is AIDS." On the whole, AIDS gets a better press. As a spelling, "Musick" pretty well sums up the feelings not just of critics but also of Broadway insiders, all those Kern/Gershwin/Rodgers/Bernstein/Loesser/Styne/Sondheim fans who've watched aghast as he's inherited by default. "Why," Lloyd Webber once asked Alan Jay Lerner, "do people take an instant dislike to me?" "It saves time," said Lerner.

Well, that's the way Alan told it. Back in the days when he was writing *My Fair Lady* and *Gigi*, that sort of tart wit would have been in the script. But by 1986, when Lloyd Webber briefly turned to Lerner for help with *Phantom of the Opera*, musicals had become earnest and overwrought and portentous, and the only snappy gags were told backstage—usually at the composer's expense. Lloyd Webber is vulnerable now—a classic example of imperial overstretch. Watching tired businessmen fidget through *Aspects of Love* in 1989, one of his collaborators said to me: "With *Aspects*, he's out to show he's audience-proof." With *Sunset Boulevard*, he has to demonstrate he's lawyer-proof. There was a discreet pay-off and a carefully worded back-of-the-book credit to the original lyricist, Amy Powers (dumped before the London opening); a million bucks to Patti LuPone (dumped for Broadway); and a suit still pending from Faye Dunaway (dumped for Los Angeles). If, as in the Billy Wilder film, the lifeless body of the author is found floating face-down in the swimming pool, there's now an endless procession of leading ladies descending that fabulous *Sunset* staircase: "Ready for my out-of-court settlement now, Mr. De Mille."

But the casting is only the symptom, not the cause, of *Sunset*'s difficulties. In what's happening at the Minskoff Theatre, all the struggles between old Broadway and England's bloated musical maximalist come into peculiarly sharp focus. From the start, the story of the young screenwriter ensnared by a forgotten star of silent pictures was odd territory for Lloyd Webber. Unlike most American writers, he's never been very interested by showbizzy backstage fables, preferring to concentrate on all the "God, what an awful idea for a musical!" ideas. Lloyd Webber is routinely derided as a cynical purveyor of commercial schlock to the bridge-'n'-tunnel crowd, but okay, if you did want to manufacture a hit, what would you pick? *42nd Street* or a bunch of twee T. S. Eliot poems staged as a Eurodisco pop video? *City of Angels* or Thomas the Tank Engine on roller skates? Hey, why didn't I think of *that*? At least Lloyd Webber's got rich from all the surefire money losers. To look at recent Broadway offerings—*The Will Rogers Follies*, *Dreamgirls*, *Barnum*, *They're Playing Our Song*, *A Chorus Line*—you'd be forgiven for thinking that, to American dramatists,

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there's no business *but* show business. Even *Sunday in the Park with George* is only *The Jolson Story* in pointillist drag.

Yet here we are on *Sunset Boulevard*: Lloyd Webber yoked to a proven hit title. "It's not the subject, it's the treatment," he likes to say. So what have he and his co-authors, Don ("Born Free") Black and Christopher (*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*) Hampton, done to it? Well, as Billy Wilder enjoyed saying in the run-up to last year's West End première, "The boys hit on a great idea: they didn't change a thing."

In musical theater, I'm not sure that's a compliment. For one thing, if you turn a talking picture about a silent-screen star into a stage musical about a silent-screen star, you're bound to lose a few ironies—especially as Wilder cast a genuine silent star in the role and then gave her, a woman who despises what words have done to movies, all the best words in the movie: "*I am* big. It's the pictures that got small." At the Minskoff, *Sunset Boulevard* is bigger than ever, but the pictures have got real small. The authors have kept the subject cinematic yet are denied the cinematic effects it needs. Where Wilder gave us Gloria Swanson in mesmeric close-ups, Trevor Nunn's staging and John Napier's gilt-dripping Gothic monster set frequently push Norma Desmond upstage, making her smaller than life.

And who needs a small Norma Desmond? In 1950, Billy Wilder could have cast, say, Joan Crawford, and the film would have worked nicely enough. But, with Swanson, you're already halfway there: you don't have to persuade the audience that she's a faded star from a lost era, because she *is*. The self-disgust William Holden's hack-on-the-make feels as he succumbs to Swanson's grotesque cartoon of a woman is easily communicated: it's still weird just to see the two of them in the same frame. There was none of that with Patti LuPone in London. Casting Swanson, you get Norma Desmond fully formed—and true: a necessary corrective to Wilder's cynicism. Casting Miss LuPone, you just get someone who does musicals.

If you're searching for the Gloria Swanson figure in the new *Sunset*, look no further than Lloyd Webber himself—and not just because he's prone to weird hand movements and mad stares. Here is a man who, as much as any silent-screen goddess, believes that gestures, images, and music are a more sophisticated form of storytelling than mere talk. The only show he's ever composed in which people *talk* was *Jeeves* (1974, written with Alan Ayckbourn); it was also his only certifiable flop. "I'm fond of *Jeeves*," he later said to me, "but I did learn that, frankly, the book musical, in the sense of dialogue interrupting the musical line, is not for me. Whether you like it or not, this *is* opera."

For better or worse, this is the revolution Lloyd Webber has wrought: musicals are now "sung-through"—or "sung incessantly," as Arthur Laurents prefers to say. Kurt Weill used to say that American audiences didn't want "Would you like a cup of coffee?" set to music. In other words, in a musical, you have to justify the music. Weill's own attempt at a "Broadway opera," *Street Scene* (1947, written with Elmer Rice and Langston Hughes), is full of play-length dialogue scenes and only turns to music when the emotional intensity merits it. In *Aspects of Love*, no one sings "Would you like a cup of coffee?" but they come pretty close:

> "Shall I make some coffee . . . ?"
>
> "One cup of fresh coffee . . ."
>
> Later: "Will croissants and fresh coffee do . . . ?"
>
> And: "An espresso? Or cappuccino . . . ?"

Later still: "Get our guest an armagnac . . ." Not to mention: "A glass of house white for me . . ." And: "Another armagnac . . ." *Aspects* merits a place in theatrical history if only as the first show where more drinks are ordered in the libretto than at intermission. No *musical* distinction is made between conversational trivialities and big character soliloquies. The precise tension of a musical—the raising of the stakes, as dialogue turns to

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underscored speech, then to verse, then to chorus—has simply been abolished. Whether you think Jule Styne is a better composer than Verdi is up to you; but it's not difficult to argue that, in the relationship between the elements and in the fusion of music and lyrics, the American musical is formally more sophisticated, more discriminating, than opera. Lloyd Webber is fond of "Some Enchanted Evening," but, in a Lloyd Webber show, "Some Enchanted Evening" would be reprised fifteen minutes later as "May I use the bathroom?"

Until *Sunset*, that is. For the first time in twenty years, we have a Lloyd Webber show in which people walk around talking—not just the odd line, but whole scenes, no underscoring, no music at all and even, occasionally, a real live cue for a song. Gracious, it could almost be a Broadway show. With *Sunset*, Lloyd Webber has turned his back on the through-composed form he virtually invented, the style in which he's cast every one of his hits since *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. In other words, a musical about a woman left behind by changing fashions has become itself a return to old-fashioned values. It's as if Billy Wilder had said to Swanson: "You're right. Let's do this as a silent movie."

If you wanted to find a genuine stage translation for *Sunset Boulevard*—that is, for a talking picture about a silent-film star—how about this: an aging musical-comedy star, her career obliterated by the new school of through-composed elephantine pop operas. You could stick Carol Channing in it, or Mitzi Gaynor, or Ann Miller: bizarre creatures beached by time and taste, lacquered and bewigged, fantastic and outlandish. Here, surely, are the contemporary equivalents to Swanson: in *Sugar Babies*, Ann Miller, under her concrete coiffure, in basque and fishnets, rat-a-tat-tatting with cane and tap shoes, aroused a similar combination of awe and pity.

I'm not being whimsical. The casting difficulties of *Sunset* can be traced back to Lloyd Webber's first rule: it's not the subject, it's the treatment. The Broadway musical, burdened by its glorious tradition, shriveled away because everyone knew too much: nominally new shows, like *La Cage Aux Folles*, were born looking like revivals. Whereas, even if you were going to adapt those T. S. Eliot poems, would you do it like that? (Up in heaven, Eliot must sometimes look down at his 1983 Tony Award for Best Lyrics and marvel: "You mean, I wrote that thing?") Recently, when *Cats* celebrated 5,000 performances at the Winter Garden, David Letterman observed that it marked the 5,000th occasion when a guy had turned to his wife and said: "What the hell is this?" The problem with *Sunset* is that it's not a "What the hell is this?" production. *Cats* and *Starlight* are freak shows, assaults on your sanity; *Sunset Boulevard*, which is about a freak, is an incredibly rational adaptation. It operates, almost, to Rodgers and Hammerstein rules. Since *Cats*, Lloyd Webber's scores have been presented to his lyricists as a *fait accompli*: all the words can hope to do is cling on for a few bars before the juggernaut shrugs them off and rolls on. In *Aspects*, for example, there is a relaxed, bisexual sculptress lounging about in pedal pushers. Suddenly, when she sings, she turns into Jeanette MacDonald chasing big open-voweled top notes. This is not a plausible singing voice for the character. In *Sunset*, though, Lloyd Webber has, for the first time, managed to distinguish character in music. So Joe Gillis (Alan Campbell) and his pals at Paramount express themselves in a breezy pop vernacular. It's not just that all the best lines from the movie have been left in, but that Don Black's lyrics have imbibed their spirit. Mimicking Cecil B. De Mille, one of his extras sings of Paramount's latest biblical epic:

> "Every girl in my chorus line
> Is a genuine Philistine . . ."

It's a droll aside, but it takes the same pleasure in wordplay that the old-school lyricists did. This is, in itself, a novelty from Lloyd Webber, but what's also new is his

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understanding that these sentiments, these people need to be differentiated musically: they sing in breezy 6/4 shuffles, jittery 5/8s, exuberant mambos. Conversely, for Norma, he's written a silent-film score: she sounds, musically, like a creature from another world, conjured by clean, spare, almost translucent 4/4 ballads, whose eerie strings and woodwinds hover like the soundtrack to a trance. The orchestrations are elusive, ambiguous—a surprisingly psychological score from a composer we've come to associate with lush operetta certainties. But it's not just music, with Black and Hampton playing Giacosa and Illica to Britain's Puccini wannabe: with this score, we're back, at last, to *song* ideas.

There are, of course, the ludicrous miscalculations beloved of Trevor Nunn and John Napier, including a supposedly filmic car chase, in which the actors frantically spin steering wheels in toytown automobiles. It *does* remind you of a film chase—unfortunately, it's Kermit the Frog trying to shake off Miss Piggy in *The Muppet Movie*. Inevitably, when Norma returns to Paramount, Nunn and Napier can't resist out-De Milling Cecil in their sets and costumes. But they barely register. Instead, your eye is drawn always to the principals and their story. In the best scene, there is one of those rare occasions when character, song, and dramatic impulse are perfectly in tune. Norma returns to the sound stage and, as a Paramount old-timer slowly turns the spot on her, she blinks and, briefly restored to the limelight, comes alive again.

> "I don't know why I'm frightened
> I know my way around here . . ."

On next year's Johnny Mathis album, "As If We Never Said Goodbye" will be just another love song. But, in context, it sums up the real romance at the heart of the show, and, from a composer reviled for empty gigantism, it's an episode of fierce intimacy.

Why then, for all that and the biggest advance in American theater history, is there the sense that *Sunset* isn't *quite* a bona fide hit? One reason is simply that Lloyd Webber now knows too much. Offered *Cats*, Hal Prince assumed it was a sophisticated British political metaphor which he, as an American, hadn't picked up. In fact, *Cats* is about cats. The naïveté of the piece, horrifying to Broadway pros, is understandable. Where Sondheim began as Hammerstein's pupil and then served as lyricist to Bernstein, Styne, and Rodgers, Lloyd Webber has had to find his way alone. Since the break with Tim Rice (who initiated *Evita*), he seems to be retracing musical theater's history, adapting the forms to his own style. *Cats* and *Starlight* are the equivalents of the Kiralfy Brothers spectacles of the 1880s; *Phantom* is a turn-of-the-century operetta; *Sunset Boulevard* is a gauche attempt at an American musical play—and, like so many Broadway musical adaptations, that's what it looks like: an adaptation. Like earlier Wilder adaptations—the Neil Simon/Bacharach and David version of *The Apartment*, Jule Styne's *Some Like It Hot*—it never transforms itself into anything in its own right, Lloyd Webber is right: it's not the subject, but the treatment. And this treatment never quite vindicates the choice of subject. You watch it; it's fine, it's professional, but you don't see the need for it.

Rattled by the initial reception in London, Black and Lloyd Webber went back to work and musicalized great chunks of the dialogue, in an attempt to Lloyd Webberize the piece. Everyone else, meanwhile, fell back on what Broadway always does: quick, we're in trouble; find a star. This, too, is new for Lloyd Webber. With *Cats*, *Starlight*, even *Phantom*, who cares who's in the cast? The genius of *Cats* is this: how would you know someone in it was acting badly?

True, Glenn Close helps. First, she *is* a film star, but, second, one whose close-set crater eyes and angular off-center features faintly evoke the manly screen goddesses of the Forties; third, her most famous role is in *Fatal Attraction*, so we, unlike poor Joe Gillis, know it is unwise to get mixed up with her: all theater, but especially musical the-

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ater, is an exercise in shorthand. Miss Close has also worked hard: although her speaking voice is flat and modern (Betty Buckley, currently in the West End, conveys a better sense of social isolation), her physical performance misses nothing, whether maternally cradling her dead chimp, scuttling chimp-like up the stairs herself, or stroking Joe's neck from behind as if she's Salome and he's already on the platter. These are memorable stage images, even if they do have the effect of leaving the non-Norma scenes a little empty. Miss Close is mistress of the house in a way her predecessor never was, but much of the impact is due to smother co-ordination: the vast set, the glitter and shadows, the columns and pediments, which buried Patti LuPone, now seem to be choreographed to the leading lady's movements.

So the headless chickens on Broadway run around pronouncing it just a star vehicle. The public have got the message, too. As I left, the woman next to me turned sourly to her husband and said: "Well, it's nothing without her." But look at Glenn Close's last show: *Death and the Maiden*, with Mike Nichols, and a Tony Award for Best Actress. It did no business; it was nothing *with* her. Glenn Close is a star in this role, because of this role.

Across the street from the Minskoff, the Roundabout Theatre revival of *The Glass Menagerie* is facing exactly the same problem as *Sunset*, albeit on a thousandth of the scale. I don't want to force parallels: where *Sunset* brims with cocky confidence, *The Glass Menagerie* is fragile and restrained. But, like Wilder's film, Tennessee Williams's first hit was a spikily modern work that derived its power from the way it successfully traded off the past. Like that mansion on Sunset, the cramped tenement in St. Louis is almost suffocated by memory (echoes of Ibsen: "I think," says someone, "we could stand a little more air in here," etc.). Like Norman Desmond, Amanda Wingfield lives stubbornly on dreams of long ago, of balls and jonquils and "gentlemen callers." But, as with Patti LuPone in Swanson's fright wigs, Julie Harris as Amanda is not the same as Laurette Taylor as Amanda. In 1944, Taylor, like Swanson, was a half-forgotten figure from a more artless and innocent theatrical era: you accepted her as a figure who lived in the past, because she lived in *your* past. Taylor had squandered her talents, most recently on booze and previously on idiotic vehicles by her various husbands. It was her second spouse, J. Hartley Manners, who struck gold in 1912 with *Peg O' My Heart*, in which Taylor played an orphan girl unloved by her haughty relatives and whose only friends are her faithful pooch and a young farmer who reveals himself to be Sir Gerald Adair, her legal guardian, and then proposes to her. "Sure there's nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream," says Peg. Curtain.

But consider this: *Peg O' My Heart* became the longest-running Broadway play ever, with eight road companies in one year alone and a silent-film version, also with Taylor. That's what she brought to Williams's new-fangled "memory play": she called Amanda "Peg grown old," still maddeningly garrulous and optimistic, but now with a Southern instead of an Irish accent. Obviously, Tennessee Williams and J. Hartley Manners have little in common as dramatists. But Williams certainly benefited from Manners's creation: in essence, he took Peg o' my heart and made her true. Both film versions (Gertrude Lawrence, Joanne Woodward) were miscast; so was the most recent revival (Jessica Tandy); so's this. The original production presented us with the epitome of sunny stage optimism and showed us that that optimism was misplaced. We do not associate Julie Harris with optimism; we associate her with what's left of serious theater in America. She brings no external resonance to the part.

In a way, this is as much a sign of decline as hiring Marla Maples to do cartwheels in *The Will Rogers Follies* (one of the more notable casting decisions of recent years). Unlike Wilder, Williams is mainly cynical about form: "The play is memory," announces Tom. "Being a memory play, it is

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dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic. In memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings. I am the narrator of the play, and also a character in it . . ." The straight-talkin' narrator and the illuminated supertitled stage directions prompt a thought: in the *Peg O' My Heart* days, the staging was ordinary but the acting wasn't; in our time, too often the staging is extraordinary but the acting isn't. We have dispensed with representationalism in the sets, only to transfer it to the acting. Nothing's done for Eugene O'Neill more than those ponderous, self-regardingly sober centenary revivals with Colleen Dewhurst and Jason Robards, dragging their gravitas like a ball and chain. Incidentally, *The Good Woman of Szechuan* notwithstanding, I've taken a relaxed view of the late Miss Dewhurst's dramatic integrity since Cameron Mackintosh told me her advice, as Equity President, to him at the height of the *Miss Saigon* casting row: "You've got a $26 million advance. What do you care who plays the part?" Hey, acting; what's the big deal?

Mackintosh, to his credit, did care. Few others do. Such stars as shine in the Broadway firmament these days have to be bused in from brighter galaxies: Brooke Shields is in *Grease!*; Jerry Lewis is close to signing for *Damn Yankees*; Tina Turner has been offered *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*. But why stop there? Why not Jerry Lewis and Tina Turner in *A Streetcar Named Desire*? Or, come to that, Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin? The ever dwindling talent pool available to the theater makes most of our back catalogue unfeasible, *Sweet Bird of Youth* as much as *Sweet Charity*. Don't take my word; check *The Broadway Celebrity Cookbook*. Excepting Angela Lansbury and Gwen Verdon, both now theatrically inactive, the most striking thing about *The Broadway Celebrity Cookbook* is that there are no Broadway celebrities in it, just reasonably competent actors who make a nice living in *Cats* and *Les Misérables* without provoking more than one in a thousand theatergoers to consult the cast list. For that reason alone, I'd rather that *Sunset Boulevard* was *The Andrew Lloyd Webber Show* than *The Glenn Close Show*.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

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Cabrera Infante's Cuba *by Mark Falcoff*
The "Macbeth" of Garry Wills *by Donald Lyons*
Pina Bausch onstage *by Laura Jacobs*
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The media

Graded on "The Bell Curve"

by James Bowman

People who offer to make the size of their I.Q.s a matter for public comment—for instance, by joining Mensa—must be among the most pathetic of self-promoters. If they had any genuine accomplishments to boast of, it seems to me, they would consider it beneath them to boast of skill in taking a test. Thus the remarkably virulent and unenlightening controversy which greeted the publication of *The Bell Curve*, by Charles Murray and the late Richard Herrnstein, has at least been the occasion of some innocent amusement.[1] Just a glance through the letters pages of *Newsweek*, for example, at all those whose denunciations of the book's "racism" claim the authority of I.Q.s in the 140s is a real hoot.

Interestingly for connoisseurs of Anglo-American differences in rhetorical style, many of the correspondents of the London *Times* on this subject chose to brag of their *low* I.Q.s, sometimes allowing their addresses—Head of Surgery, Guy's Hospital, as it might be—to provide an illogical (no one has ever said that low I.Q. *cannot* accompany high achievement) but wittily ironic commentary. But the best fun to be had with the issue on this side of the Atlantic was supplied by *The New Republic*, which apologized for giving Murray and Herrnstein a forum for their views by calling up an extraordinary parade of critics, all of whom attempted either to refute their argument or to discredit it.

This uniformly negative phalanx of commentators was placed between the readers and Murray and Herrnstein themselves, who were given eleven pages—five fewer than their detractors—to make their case to anyone who had come so far and still thought it possible that they could have anything sensible to say. This arrangement makes Andrew Sullivan's editorial apologia, in which, remarkably, he defends the magazine's offering Murray-Herrnstein a forum against an unspecified number of its own editors, look rather disingenuous. The fine words about the value of free intellectual inquiry—unfortunately marred by a carelessly racialist use of the words "dark" and "tarred"—have to be set against the unanimity of the assembled commentators in what amounts to an editorial disclaimer half again as long as the offending argument.

In it we find Murray-Herrnstein redundantly proven wrong on the authority of a host of social scientists, writers, and journalists whose actual arguments are less often cited. Not only their reasoning and their good will are impugned, but even the supposed facts upon which they are operating, and their own arguments are grossly and repeatedly distorted and misrepresented. The only contribution even remotely sympathetic to Murray and Herrnstein is that of the paper's owner, Martin Peretz, and this is

1 *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, by Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein; The Free Press, 845 pages, $30.

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because he virtually ignores *The Bell Curve* in favor of a gratuitous attack on affirmative action. The funniest contributor is Leon Wieseltier, who is careful to point out that he is among the Ashkenazi Jews of European origin whose intelligence scores are at the top of the Murray-Herrnstein charts before proceeding to thunder how "repulsed" he is by the idea of being so labeled.

Such fun, alas, was too infrequent for those of us who followed the commentary closely, so I propose a little game. Let us grade the critics of Murray-Herrnstein according to the intelligence of their responses and distribute the results along a curve of our own. Does it describe a bell? Yes it does! Are Murray and Herrnstein vindicated? You be the judge.

Not surprisingly, I suppose, the left lip of the bell, the *lumpen*-intelligentsia, the dregs of the intellectual cup, the Forrest Gumps of the punditry, are largely academics. Many of them, it is true, labor under the disadvantage of being judged according to the samples of their thought supplied to journalists. But subject to correction, we notice in *The Wall Street Journal* that Leon Kamin of Northeastern University reaches the brilliant conclusion that *The Bell Curve* "will be much cited and used as a justification for the view that nothing can be done about social problems," and that Dr. Howard Gardner of Harvard accuses the research in Murray and Herrnstein's book, in which I.Q. is merely used as a predictor of economic success, of being "very anachronistic" because it does not take account of his own, in which it is revealed that intelligence is more than I.Q.

Also in the *Journal*, Robert Sternberg of Yale says that Murray and Herrnstein "come pretty close to a problematical equating of I.Q. with the value of a person." How they can "come pretty close" to a point of view that they explicitly disavow is left obscure, but Sternberg also told *Newsweek* that "the fact that Murray and Herrnstein ignore this difference" between intelligence and I.Q.—a difference they do not ignore but, in fact, insist on—"is proof that the authors' [political] agenda is driving their interpretation of the statistics." Also in *Newsweek*, Dr. Alvin Poussaint of Harvard Medical School is quoted thus: "They're saying it's science, but it has a racist effect"—as if it were self-evident that real science could not possibly have any racist effects. These stupid responses should be lumped together with those of most of the journalists who quote them and whose purpose is pretty clearly to discredit the book. *Newsweek*'s Tom Morganthau, for instance, in a striking instance of the bias he is attacking, writes that "Murray, an intellectual snake charmer whose greatest gift may be the knack of always seeming to be fair and always in earnest, vehemently denies he is racist."

Well, what do you expect of an intellectual snake charmer? Clearly, Morganthau is one intellectual snake that the trick did not work on! A similarly dunderheaded response is to be found in Barbara Vobejda's news article in *The Washington Post*, in which she writes that "the thesis of [the] book is based on several controversial assumptions: that intelligence can be equated with I.Q.; that it can be accurately measured by a test that is not biased against ethnic and racial minorities; and that a significant component of intelligence is inherited." Of these three "controversial assumptions," the first is not made by the book but is, in fact, warned against; the second is not made as an assumption but is carefully and painstakingly demonstrated by a host of evidence; and the third, though an assumption, is said to be hardly controversial. Barbara joins the gaggle of professors in the dunce class.

Also among the dunces is Richard Cohen of *The Washington Post*, who not only makes the *ad hominem* argument that Murray and Herrnstein are politically motivated, not only implies that they are racists (their book "has been greeted with nothing less than glee in certain circles" he says, darkly), and not only ludicrously misrepresents their argument when he writes that "they argue that poverty, crime, out-of-wedlock births—all these pathologies and more—are not culturally based (or not exclusively so) but

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genetic." Worst and most ludicrously self-contradictory of all is his conclusion. Having earlier in the same column cried shame on "the politics of those who would junk affirmative action," he concludes by writing: "To see a person first and foremost as a member of a group is more than merely unfair. It may be the only definition of un-American with which I have no quarrel."

Without committing quite such blatant stupidities, a number of those from *The New Republic*'s assassination squad shoulder in close to these dunces—especially those who, like Jeffrey Rosen and Charles Lane, are glib in branding Murray and Herrnstein as "neo-Nazis." Likewise, Michael Lind finds sinister connections to a racialist cabal financed by the deep pockets of the sinister Pioneer Fund and sees Murray and Herrnstein as, willingly or unwillingly, tools of the "crypto-nativist" and "neo-hereditarian" Right now in the process of taking over the Republican Party in the guise of "resurgent fundamentalism." Lind actually never gets round to considering the Murray-Herrnstein argument on its merits, so concerned is he to point to its discreditable antecedents. It seems to go without saying that anyone who keeps such company can be up to no good.

Also in *The New Republic*, Randall Kennedy and Wieseltier go to some lengths to show that, in spite of their own and their numerous colleagues' intellectual assault on the man, Murray required no courage to say what he says, either because its outrageousness will bring profit to him (Kennedy) or because it is old news from discredited sources (Wieseltier). Stanley Crouch makes a frivolous, intensely annoying "creative writing" sort of response that seems to associate Murray-Herrnstein with the sort of know-nothings who fear that the "lower" races will lapse into cannibalism. Mickey Kaus's angry charge against the authors of "dishonesty" is obviously owing to the fact that he himself wrote a book not long ago saying almost exactly the same thing as Murray and Herrnstein but without the race and I.Q. part. He is, I'm sure, bountifully endowed with intelligence, but he has to dissociate himself from M & H pronto. Therefore, we won't grade his paper with the others.

One of the most common of the stupid responses to the book is exampled by Brent Staples, writing in the "Editorial Notebook" of *The New York Times*. Staples raises up a straw man of "intelligence," whose "real" nature is still largely unknown and which, therefore, must have virtually nothing to do with I.Q.—which Murray and Herrnstein avowedly adopt not for its ontological cogency but for its practical usefulness as a predictor of future economic success. He then goes on to repeat the long-discredited slander against Sir Cyril Burt that he made up much of the data in his research on identical twins and to assert, without mentioning their evidence, that Murray and Herrnstein "have merely reasserted the long-unproven claim that I.Q. is mainly inherited"—a claim for which "there exist no plausible data"!

A similar *bêtise* is committed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (another academic), who reviews the book in *The Washington Post Book World* of November 6. Csikszentmihalyi puts on a great show of evenhandedness but regretfully comes down on the anti-*Bell Curve* side, since "it is well known that intelligence is a function of what happens in the nervous system. It is well known that the nervous system is a plastic organ shaped over many months in the mother's womb, and then in the first years of an infant's life. . . . It seems inconceivable that the authors should have downplayed the amount of positive change that intervention during this phase of life could make." And, therefore, the author feels no compunctions when he goes on to compare the book "somewhat hyperbolically" to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*!

Of course Murray and Herrnstein do not "downplay" the importance of pre-natal and early childhood experience for intelligence. All they do is point out—surely unexceptionably?—that someone in Washington

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with a few billions of conscience money to spend is unlikely to be able to do very much about manipulating these experiences for the babies of the entire bottom socio-economic quintile in order to produce useful gains in intelligence. For this they are compared to Hitler? This is a good example of the lower-quintile but not quite rock-bottom liberal response. A little higher up the curve we have Christopher Winship on the op-ed page of *The New York Times*, who compared the reaction to Murray and Herrnstein with that which greeted Daniel Patrick Moynihan's warnings about black illegitimacy rates in the 1960s.

> Mr. Moynihan and his defenders were denounced as racists and the African-American family became a taboo subject for scholars for the next 20 years. As we now try to grapple with the desperate situation of many black families in this country, we are missing two decades of research that could have informed current policy.

But of course it would not do simply to say this without making some kind of dissociative gesture, some antiseptic disclaimer to ward off infection by Murray-Herrnstein's "racism." Thus Winship says that "the consensus" among academics is "that the book's argument is inherently racist and that Mr. Herrnstein (who died in September) and Mr. Murray are academic charlatans"—as if its being racist (assuming that it is) automatically precluded its being true. And, speaking for himself rather than the "consensus," he criticizes the authors' line of argument for being "divisive and irresponsible," as if an arguer's first responsibility were owed to social harmony rather than to the truth.

It is this kind of thinking, this fear that the orthodoxies of social thought might be discredited by research, which makes it impossible for Winship's warning about taboos to be heeded. He is in the position of a Victorian bishop living in continual dread of what assault upon his beliefs science might throw up next. We cannot but sympathize with such people, but it is one measure of intelligence to be aware of one's own assumptions and fears and their likely effects on one's thinking. Most of those who are to be found on the upward slope of the bell are not so aware.

Bunched up in the middle of the field at the top of the bell are those who manage to say something intelligent, for good or ill, about *The Bell Curve*, but then deplore its effects—as if the effects were adventitious and unconnected to the rest, as if Murray and Herrnstein had added them to the inert parts of their argument out of sheer ill will. These commentators share with the Victorian bishop a desire not to know that which they find uncongenial to their assumptions, but, unlike those lower down the scale, they are not intellectually paralyzed by their fear. Among those subject to this infirmity is the editorialist of *The Times* of London, who laments that Murray and Herrnstein "lay themselves open to the charge that their real object is to discredit all programmes of social reform as a pointless attempt to reverse the irreversible" but who refuses to consider whether or not in fact all programs of social reform *are* pointless attempts, etc.

The anonymous editorialist acknowledged that he had taken his lead from Adrian Wooldridge, a fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, and the author of *Measuring the Mind: Education and Psychology in England, 1860–1990*, which came out in the UK at almost the same time as Murray-Herrnstein. Writing elsewhere in *The Times*, Wooldridge very intelligently pointed out that intelligence testing, so far from being the means of excluding people from the elite, has historically been the means of including them. He accepts the genetic component of intelligence, but sees it as regressing, as so many exceptional genetic features do, to the mean. This means that those in the elite who wish to preserve their privileges for children who may well be less talented than they are would do better to rely on other means than intelligence testing—such as living in ex-

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pensive neighborhoods where there are superior schools that are unavailable to the poor but talented.

But then Wooldridge becomes too clever by half by suggesting that Murray-Herrnstein might argue for "a more generous, not a more parsimonious social policy. The fact that some people are constitutionally dull should surely, in an enlightened society, promote a generous system of compensation." Of course a generous system of compensation is what we have now. Recent reports calculate that someone living in Manhattan would have to earn $45,000 per annum to enjoy the same standard of living as a welfare mother. But Murray has been among the forefront of those who have shown that this "compensation" is counterproductive and tends to generate various social pathologies.

Wooldridge counts as a veritable genius among academic folk, but limitations of space do not permit me to list all the writers and commentators at the top of the bell curve who, like him, have something intelligent to say but too much unacknowledged anxiety about this subject to say it quite intelligently. On the downward slope of the bell are to be found such intelligent pieces as that of Jim Holt, done for the op-ed page of *The New York Times*, in which he raised the important point that, in terms of evolutionary biology, "innate differences in intelligence among the races have simply not had enough time to evolve." Much more likely as an explanation for apparent racial differences in intelligence is the quality of pre-natal care, which is demonstrably inferior among blacks but an environmental effect which looks like a genetic one to social scientists.

Taking up a similar argument in the paper's Sunday "Week in Review" section, George Johnson suggests that the consensus among biologists is that the operations of the brain are in measurable terms much more the product of primal neural experience than of the relatively limited amount of genetic information required to form "the rough shape of this glob of neurological clay" that is our brain of original issue. Douglas Besharov, in the "Outlook" section of the same day's *Washington Post*, makes a similar point. Besharov scores high on the intelligence scale for recognizing and stating accurately *The Bell Curve*'s actual thesis (which has nothing to do with genetics), but he goes on to consider the problems posed by those the violence of whose objections to the book are directly proportional to their belief in its hopelessness. According to Besharov, there are still a lot of reasons for supposing that we can do things about raising intelligence, including both the improvement of pre-natal care and early childhood education and allowing the natural process of gentrification in the black middle classes to take its course.

Just below the highest levels of intelligence come those among the Victorian bishops who recognize their own fears of uncongenial facts and deal with them frankly. Murray and Herrnstein say in their *New Republic* article that they have undertaken their study because it is socially unhealthy for there to be "a taboo issue, filled with potential for hurt and anger" to be found "just beneath the surface of American life," and claim that "it is essential that people begin to talk about this in the open." But for all the hostile attention lavished on their arguments, there has been almost none given to this one. Its hidden analogy is drawn from therapeutic assumptions. Just as it is taken as axiomatic by therapists that "repression" of emotions is psychically unhealthy, so it is taken as axiomatic by Murray and Herrnstein that taboo subjects are socially unhealthy.

Not being either a therapist or a social scientist, I am perhaps not qualified to express an opinion on this subject, but it does seem curious to me that, as both the good times and the bad times in all of human history known to us have been marked by examples of repression of both individual emotion and social taboos, so few people think it worth even raising a question about the validity of these assumptions. It is true that, in his contribution to *The New Re-*

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public's Aunt Sally game, John Judis raises the possibility of a good taboo, but frames it so as to make the issue easy for himself. "It's not the taboo against unflinching scientific inquiry" that Murray and Herrnstein are taking on, he says, "but against pseudo-scientific racism"—the taboo on which, needless to say, "is most deserving of retention."

He never considers even the possibility of racist science's being other than pseudo, but Nathan Glazer is braver than this, allowing that what Murray and Herrnstein say may well be true, but rather shockingly dismisses it as a truth the knowledge of which does not seem to produce any "good results."

> Our society [he writes] our polity, our elites, according to Herrnstein and Murray, live with an untruth: that there is no good reason for this inequality, and therefore society is at fault and we must try harder. I ask myself whether the untruth is not better for American society than the truth.

Put so baldly, this view sounds rather sinister and Machiavellian, but Sir Peregrine Worsthorne, once the editor and now the diarist of the London *Sunday Telegraph*, makes a similar point and sounds only quaintly anachronistic. Worsthorne is as hostile to Murray and Herrnstein as many another commentator, regarding them and anyone else engaged in similar research as, *ipso facto*, "pretty nasty pieces of work whom I would not wish to know." His reason is not their alleged dishonesty but the "wounding rudeness" of too much inconsiderate honesty.

"It is inexcusable," Worsthorne insists, "to tell people that they are stupid even if they are; bad manners, unkind, in a word ungentlemanly." Of course, the pursuit of truth trumps all such arguments, he recognizes, and "if Charles Darwin was right to tell the truth about man's descent from the apes, in spite of this undermining of the Christian religion, so are these American scientists to tell the truth about differing racial I.Q.s, in spite of this undermining the religion of racial equality." But "if ever there was a case for the scientific equivalent of a white lie, turning a blind eye, then surely race is it." This seems to me an honorable and an intelligent thing to say.

What we know is altered by our publication of it: No statement of a truth is made in isolation, and its truthfulness is compromised by the circumstances of its utterance. We are all aware of this on some levels. For instance, the intelligent man who says that intelligence does not matter so much as common sense may be stating a truth about intelligence (in the absence of a clear definition of common sense we cannot be sure) but he certainly *is* stating something about himself: that he is not stuck-up about his big brain and not trying to set himself up as better than you poor slobs who are reading his words. Most of the time he feels he has to say something like this precisely because he *is* stuck up and setting himself up as better than the poor slobs who are reading his words.

What, then, is the possible truth value of his statement? Very small, I would have thought. In the same way, Murray and Herrnstein's saying (or implying) that the fact that blacks are better than whites at dancing and basketball, as they do in the most regrettable part of their *New Republic* piece, is self-evidently an attempt to deprecate attacks on their invidious thesis by conceding *some* area of superiority to the otherwise inferior black man. What is the truth value of that statement? Similarly very small. It would be better not to say such things —not only more diplomatic but, in an important sense, more truthful, since we know and are always likely to know less of the truth about race and I.Q. than we are the truth about why people say the things that they do.

At the extreme-right-hand edge of the bell, I am tempted to place the likes of Jerry Adler of *Newsweek*, who makes the brilliant but not quite relevant point that the distribution of life's goodies may correlate well with I.Q. but does so even more with good looks, and Ms. Valerie M. Hudson of Brigham Young University, who, in a letter to *The New York*

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Times, points to a little-known but striking correlation between intelligence and breast feeding, a practice engaged in by 54 percent of white mothers but only 8 percent of blacks. But indisputably among the brightest are Thomas Sowell and Charles Krauthammer, both of whom accurately reproduce the thesis and arguments of *The Bell Curve*. Neither tries to posture in order to reveal to us his own superior intelligence and/or compassion to those he is writing about, and both express disagreement with details of the book but agreement with its broad outlines.

David Brooks of *The Wall Street Journal* belongs with them. He asks: "Smart people do better than dumb people—so what? This apparently obvious principle radically undermines the whole range of arguments made in the name of the holy troika of race, class and gender studies." Equally brainy is Robert Samuelson, who is able to accept Murray and Herrnstein's broad conclusions while at the same time pointing out that the various social pathologies that correlate with low intelligence—in particular crime and illegitimacy—have increased in the population over the past thirty-five years without there being any corresponding decrease in intelligence. In other words, "other changes in the social or economic climate must have done the main damage" and "the effect of intelligence is secondary. All Murray and Herrnstein say is that those with lower-than-average intelligence are especially vulnerable to these changes." If those words had been inscribed at the beginning, a whole issue of *The New Republic* would have been unnecessary.

But at the summit of intelligence I would have to put Glenn Loury who, against the unpromising background of *The New Republic*'s slug-fest, is able to take the Glazer/Worsthorne argument a stage further. "Just how necessary is it," he asks, "that we engage in a public discourse of regret concerning what they present as the unfortunate but recalcitrant disabilities of an identifiable set of our fellows?" Language depends on context, and Loury is the only one to make explicit the necessary point that, whatever the truth or falsity of their claims, "*declaring a stark and intractable gap between the intellectual abilities of black and white Americans is a political act*." (Emphasis in the original.)

This is indisputable, and something that it is debatable whether Murray and Herrnstein were intelligent enough to see for themselves. Here is one instance wherein falling a little short in intelligence would be to their credit. Loury, whose criticisms are the more telling for being among the very few intelligent ones, also deserves distinction for his lapidary conclusion, that "the inherent equality of human beings [is] an ethical axiom, not a psychologically contingent fact." These words ought to stand at the head of any discussion of the subject as a warning to both sides.

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Books

Lowell in the shadows

by William Logan

Our longing for literature has the force of a prejudice, and to account for both the mystery and method of that prejudice we need a distinguishing case. Since Robert Lowell's death in 1977, his reputation has suffered a slow-motion collapse. Even the most distinguished poets are eclipsed by death (we are as worn out by the mediocrity of the bad as by the brutal magnificence of the good). It is a shallow thing, reputation, and its standing before death bears little relation to its standing afterward. This would amuse a family with the long history of the Lowells: such a family can wait for the justice of history, if history is just.

Lowell was the form and the shadow of postwar poetry. *Lord Weary's Castle* shaped the mannerisms of the Fifties, and the Sixties were a long footnote (we are still writing that footnote) to *Life Studies*. This simplifies the sources and ignores the exceptions, but for forty years after *Lord Weary* Lowell was the poet who troubled the sleep of other poets. The great modernists who preceded him have also been dead twenty years or more, and we live in the diminished landscape after such genius. Those who believe we are in a major phase of American poetry have closed their ears to the past. We must retire the past to prepare a revival, however, and perhaps we should be grateful that for all its suppressed power Lowell's poetry has been rendered mortal by disfavor, by familiarity, by the small contempts of biography.

Lowell's life, like his art, was a series of set pieces, in part because he worked so much of his life into the nakedness of his art. He was born to a prominent Boston family, beneath the silhouette of the State House, on the verge of American entry into the First World War. The models for the brownstone pillars in his grandfather Winslow's front doorway stood at the Temple of the Kings at Memphis. The wealth once concentrated in that generation of Winslows left his parents set up on the thin stilts of trust funds and a Naval salary—Lowell later wrote of his mother that she had "a genius for squeezing luxury out of rocks."

The scenes from such a life fall helplessly into anecdote, but the anecdotes have the symbolic force of Melville, where tragedy and the Bible have equal influence and equal effect (and mocking undertones): Lowell the Harvard dropout and would-be poet, pitching a tent on Allen Tate's front lawn, having misunderstood Southern irony for invitation; Lowell, blind drunk, ramming the family Packard into a wall and ruining the face of his fiancée, Jean Stafford; Lowell, a Catholic C.O. during the Second World War, imprisoned—for refusing to kill—next to the czar of Murder, Inc.; Lowell, like a young Senator McCarthy, nosing out Communists at an art colony; Lowell in the grip of mania, holding Allen Tate out a window while reciting his "Ode to the Confederate Dead" in a bear's growl; Lowell on mad ward after mad ward, the manic attacks coming biannually, then annually, then twice

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a year. The incidents are misleading in their notoriety, and the duty of biography is to face down the notoriety and find the small, still context of the original sins.

Lowell was a religious poet, early and late, and we miss the essential transforming character of his work if we fail to understand his politics, his politic evasions, his evasive confessions, in terms of the failed sanctities of a religious life. The early summer retreats to an isolated stretch of Nantucket for regimens of reading, the later retreats to monasteries and art colonies (his months in prison allowing a monastic asceticism, too), the conversion to Catholicism and the later apostasy, and the various failed recourses to psychiatry suggest successive stages of a life that gradually exhausted the defenses of the will. (If we do not quite expect the grace of communion at the hands of psychiatrists, the rituals of the couch are little different from the rituals of the Cross—and there was a point when the shock-treatment table was almost the altar of American intellectual life.)

Properly speaking, however, a poet doesn't have a life. He may go through the motions of St. Mark's and Harvard and Kenyon, of marrying three women and having daughter and son, of betraying his wives and his friends, of dying in a taxi cab; but his actual life is all the while in language. The biography of the art is never the biography of the body, however much the ravages of the body may find their mark upon the art; and we do both the man and the poetry a disservice by trying to make the marks on one equivalent to the marks on the other. The differential calculus that would measure the value of one in terms of the other has never been invented.

Lowell, as it happened, composed prose fragments of a life during a period of mental breakdown in the late Fifties (the only portion he published was "91 Revere Street" in *Life Studies*). These fragments, some of which appeared posthumously in *The Collected Prose of Robert Lowell*, have remarkable emotional texture and symbolic example, even if the characters all too often talk not as if they were kin to Robert Lowell, but as if they *were* Robert Lowell ("Great-aunt Sarah lifted a hand dramatically to the mute keys of the dummy piano. 'Barbarism lies behind me,' she declaimed grandly. 'Mannerism is ahead.'")

A poet is never a reliable witness to his life, for all the non-poetic reasons (perjury being our daily bread) and for one intimately and mordantly poetic: that the life is too rich not to become a source of the art and too limited not to be transformed by the processes of art. It becomes art not in its faith but by its falsity. These are old matters to aestheticians and philosophers, and Plato would properly have driven us out of his Republic. We would have gone to live happily among the Cretan liars. In "91 Revere Street" Lowell mentioned his boyhood love for some lead soldiers from Dijon. A poet, thinking to ingratiate himself, sent Lowell some lead soldiers found in Dijon—but Lowell had made up the detail, "on the Flaubertian principle of always being particular."

This cautionary anecdote is repeated in Paul Mariani's fact-heavy new biography of Lowell, meant to replace Ian Hamilton's of a dozen years ago.[1] Despite the caution, which lies quietly among his notes, Mariani uses Lowell's fragments as if Lowell had been under oath. And yet Lowell's fictive use of himself surrounds every story—the fragments on his youth show the ordinary unhappiness of a coddled childhood, none of the potential violence or obsessive will to power that began to disfigure his adolescence. Mariani's portrait of the young Lowell is therefore attenuated by the limits of the man in his own mirror and, most other witnesses being dead, the lack of other evidence. Even Lowell's tales from the mental hospital—written in a bemused, equable style—reveal little of the associative genius or brilliant intuitiveness to which his friends and early students attest. We would not

1 *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell*, by Paul Mariani; Norton, 527 pages, $27.50.

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know from Lowell why he commanded such loyalty, or why he was memorable before he was significant. Most men are mysteries to themselves: they are fascinating when they are mysteries to others.

Every biographer suffers the fable of his biography, and usually a fable of hero worship or parricide, the one sometimes becoming the other. Here the biographer has so restricted his comprehensions to the closed border of the particular, the fable of factuality, that it is not surprising that so many of his facts are immigrant fictions. By not admitting that the fictions are fictions, he must pretend that they are something else—gospel truth, for example.

Sometimes it is not clear, except to a scourer of notes, that such fictions are dressed as facts:

> "That awful summer!", Jean would remember, when "every poet in America came to stay with us. It was the first summer after the war, when people once again had gasoline and could go where they liked. . . . And then all day I'd cook and wash the dishes and chop the ice and weed the garden and type my husband's poems and quarrel with him."

But this is not memoir; this is a story composed decades later called "An Influx of Poets." Mariani is fond of the evidence of this story, and when using it earlier seems to understand the problem of evidence:

> Forty years later, in her short story/memoir "An Influx of Poets," Jean would describe a thinly disguised version of Cal: "Half a year after we were married, [Cal], immersed in the rhythms of Gerard Manley Hopkins, . . ."

This is not quite good enough. A "short story/memoir" promises the fact within fiction, and conveniently ignores its inconvenient status as fiction; just as the biographer's sleight-of-hand in replacing the fictional "Theron" in that quotation with Lowell's unfictional nickname "Cal" allows him to claim the disguise as no more than the man. Jean Stafford had trouble with facts even when they were not fictions—but we are not obliged to treat a story as a concealed affidavit, and neither is Lowell's biographer. If it were an affidavit, we would have to wonder why the Lowells' house is Maine was purchased not with a bequest from a fictional aunt, but with royalties from Stafford's first novel; and why the biographer fails to pursue the claim that "Theron Maybank" is anti-Semitic.

Lowell's poems are everywhere taken as precision instruments of recall: "Lowell would remember a 'sand-red sow/ grubbing acorns by a cinder pile.'" Even if we allow the intimacies between the life and the art, this is from a poem written more than a decade later about the day Lowell was driven to prison. Are we to trust as untampered memory a symbol as convenient as a pig grubbing up its living beside the ashes? *Lowell would remember.* It may be within the permissible limits of speculation to write, regarding the fictional use of violent fact:

> . . . while she was dreaming of a former lover, Cal had awakened her to make love and, still half asleep, she'd repeated her lover's name. In a perfect frenzy, Cal tried to strangle her. . . . In an unpublished draft of "A Country Love Story," Jean would play the scene again, having the wife, alienated by her husband's absorption in his work, fantasize instead about an imaginary lover.

It seems beyond those limits to write in the next paragraph about Lowell's long poem "The Mills of the Kavanaughs," in which a woman recalls the violence of her husband (called Harry, not Robert Lowell), that in the published versions Lowell "could not bring himself to speak even then of his attempt to take her against her will." What the life has endured the poem may not require.

Lowell could be violent, in and out of mania, and the roster of his assaults includes boyhood friends, his father, Jean Stafford (he broke her nose months after ruining her face), his friend Frank Parker, Allen Tate, Delmore Schwartz, a wealthy lover (whom he took by the neck and threw to the floor

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during an argument about Shakespeare), and any number of policemen and psychiatric attendants. There is at least one possible strangling and attempted rape (alluded to above), and numerous threats (the month before he drove the Packard into a wall, he threatened to do so). These do not require the speculations of fiction or the tainted evidence of poetry. But since biography is commonly an assault on the life, why should it not be an assault on the imagination as well?

Some of this might be forgivable in an interpretive biography, a dark Freudian masterpiece like Berryman on Stephen Crane—Freudians are usually able to tell the dream from the declamation. Mariani's is an archival biography, a biography of petty fact, of itinerary, guest list, street address, of performances attended, books read, records heard. He knows the life like a travel agent—"Afterwards, the Lowells . . . sailed from Brindisi to Turkey to encounter Constantinople, Bursa, Smyrna, and Ephesus, before sailing on to Greece (Priene, Delphi, Athens, Corinth, Sounion). . . . Then on to Venice, Vienna, Paris, Versailles." If you want to know to which floor Lowell was dragged in a mental hospital, Mariani will remember. And he will insist on telling you. By drudge-like labor he has produced a thorough chronology of a life, thereby modestly correcting numerous trivial mistakes by his predecessor and bringing from dusty files forgotten paragraphs of that life, like Lowell's long, warm correspondence with Santayana.

The petty faults of such an enterprise are almost beneath notice—the scattering of typographical errors or solecisms (*New york*, *Cincinatti*, *miniscule*, *Boden* for *Bowden* Broadwater, *Gunther* for *Günter* Grass, *St. John* for *St.-John* Perse, *Stonybrook* for *Stony Brook*, *St. Elizabeth's* for *St. Elizabeths* [a mistake Hamilton also makes throughout]), the wayward syntax, the occasional ludicrous sentence (". . . even as the war came to a horrifying but swift conclusion with the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan, Jarrell pored through Cal's poems line by line. . . ." *Even*?), the overcharged or trite phrasing ("they could feel rebellion crackling in every fiber of their son's body," "he could have cut the chill . . . with a knife"), the inadequate index, the irritating hearty familiarity ("Cal" and "Lizzie" for Lowell and Hardwick). None of this would matter if Lowell were the living presence of these hoarded facts, these errors; but these are facts starved of interpretation. They pile up, little dust heaps of forgotten events, with scarcely a pause for analysis or motive or insight or intuition. The poems are quoted for the factual cob beneath the kernel (though usually we get just the kernel); but fewer than half a dozen are examined, and these the old warhorses or sawhorses, to the dissection of which Mariani brings little of interest, and less of passion.

One might shelve such a vast hulk of biography if there weren't intermittent signs of where the shimmer of facts might lead. Mariani dryly contrasts the fond recollections of Lowell's old teachers, Eberhart and Ransom, with their harsher judgments written at the scene. When he says that, in Holland, Lowell would find "a new way of seeing, closer to the mode of the Dutch realists," or that Lowell "was not yet fully aware of translation's links for him to schizophrenia and manic depression," we face a differential intelligence and integrating comprehension. These are the beginnings of an unwritten book.

Hamilton was roundly criticized for his concentration on the lurid and violent episodes. Those episodes recede into the dailiness of Mariani's biography, and within the recitation of days when nothing much happened we remember that outside the months of madness were years of literary production at a harrowing and original level, that outside the lightning streaks of breakdown was the steady rain of sanity (or something unlike sanity, the sanity of minor genius), that the tropical love affairs were banded by temperate zones of marital affection. Lowell was humbled by his illness, contrite on his return to the living.

On the other hand, Hamilton has a

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sharper intuition of how men act and why things happen. He tells how *Land of Unlikeness* came to be published, gives a thorough account of the scandal over the award of the Bollingen Prize to Ezra Pound, and explains the whole bungle behind Lowell's failure to win election as Oxford Professor of Poetry: to these Mariani is largely indifferent (he forgets even to mention the outcome of the election). Passage by passage, Hamilton is vivid and specific, and his anecdotes, though gossip, are memorable gossip. He has a leisurely eighteenth-century way with narrative, and his very long quotations let numerous characters speak for themselves. Mariani treats the same quotations with a Vegematic.

I have concentrated on the unsatisfactory aspects of this biography because there the form of the prejudice is most apparent: where literature becomes not the end but an interference or impediment, a concealing scrim placed between the reader and the life. But what if matters were reversed, and we accepted that literature had its own psychology, its own biography, and these were lived in different valences from the flesh? It is useful to know the terms on which Lowell and Stafford lived in Black Rock, but that does not make "Colloquy in Black Rock" a transcript of their lives. We may know more about the poem by knowing the circumstances surrounding its composition; but what we know is the contingent force, not the impenetrable action. It is more likely that the life is the lived issue of the poems. These are ancient arguments.

There is a further problem. Mariani expresses in his acknowledgments his great debt to his predecessor, but a reader casually comparing the two books finds greater debts left unacknowledged. Consider a typical incident in Hamilton:

> . . . Peter Taylor had organized a Writers' Forum (really a kind of Kenyon reunion, with old classmates Robie Macauley and John Thompson there, as well as Taylor and Jarrell).

And the same incident in Mariani:

> Taylor had organized a Writers' Forum there, in effect a Kenyon reunion which included Robie Macauley, John Thompson, Warren, Cal, and himself.

Or Vienna in Hamilton:

> The Seminar in American Studies was held in an eighteenth-century rococo castle called Schloss Leopoldskron—it would have been hard to find a less mundane location for this multilingual gathering of some one hundred poets, artists and musicians from all over Europe.

And Vienna in Mariani:

> . . . the Salzburg Seminar in American Civilization, located in an eighteenth-century rococo castle called the Schloss Leopoldskron. . . . It was a vibrant, multi-lingual gathering of some one hundred poets, artists, and musicians from all over Europe.

Or a dinner party in Hamilton:

> . . . he attended a dinner party given by Caresse Crosby . . . for the French poet St.-John Perse and was there introduced to a wealthy Georgetown neighbor, Mrs. Carley Dawson.

And a dinner party in Mariani:

> Cal attended a dinner party given by Caresse Crosby for the French poet, St. John Perse, and was introduced that evening to a wealthy Georgetown neighbor, Mrs. Carley Dawson.

Or genealogy in Hamilton:

> . . . there were the Pilgrims, the frontiersmen, the Indian killers, the colonial governors, the Revolutionary War hero General Stark, and even a reputed witch.

And genealogy in Mariani:

> . . . puritans, frontiersmen, Indian killers, colonial governors, a Revolutionary War general, even a reputed witch.

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Or a list in Hamilton:

> These poems included final versions of "Beyond the Alps," "Words for Hart Crane," "Inauguration Day: January 1953" and "To Delmore Schwartz" (this last a poem he'd begun in 1946). The new poems were "Skunk Hour," "Man and Wife" . . ., "Memories of West Street and Lepke," "To Speak of the Woe That Is in Marriage" . . ., "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," "Commander Lowell" and "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms."

And a list in Mariani:

> Out of this period would come final versions of "Beyond the Alps," "Words for Hart Crane," "Inauguration Day: January 1953," and "To Delmore Schwartz," the last begun in 1946. The new poems would be "Skunk Hour," "Man and Wife," "Memories of West Street and Lepke," "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage," "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," "Commander Lowell," and "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms."

Or Jarrell in Hamilton:

> . . . his tennis, the girlfriend he had in town, his sometimes scathing view of Ransom, and also his conceit, his intransigence, his primness.

And Jarrell in Mariani:

> . . . the way he played tennis, the teacher girlfriend he had in town, . . . his criticism even of Ransom, his conceit, his intransigence, even his primness.

Or Eugene McCarthy in Hamilton:

> . . . Lowell almost *did* lose him votes by telling the owners of the sweater factories that the workers in the shoe factory seemed so much happier than their own employees.

And McCarthy in Mariani:

> . . . Cal did almost lose him votes when he told the owners of several New Hampshire sweater factories that workers in the shoe factories seemed much happier than their own employees.

Or a night in Ireland in Hamilton:

> . . . first the telephone failed, then the electricity. He tried to leave the house to make calls from the nearby village . . . but, in the dark, was unable to locate a latch on the one door. . . . It could not have been easy even to find his way back to his top-floor apartment; when the cleaning woman "released" him in the morning, he complained that Castletown "was a very bad place; it needs an elevator"; then, she says: "he went down with one lot of suitcases and then he came back up again and gave me three dollars. . . ."

And a night in Ireland in Mariani:

> First the telephone failed, then the electricity. When he tried to leave the darkened house to make a call from the village, he could not find his way out, and had to grope back up the stairs to his top-floor apartment. In the morning, it was the cleaning woman who released him. . . . he told her that Castletown "was a very bad place" and needed an elevator. Then he carried his own suitcases down, climbed back up, and handed her three dollars.

None of the passages in Mariani acknowledges Hamilton as its source, and none seems to derive from some unacknowledged third source. The passages on McCarthy and Ireland come from interviews done by Hamilton. There are dozens of such parallel passages, and many others where the writing seems to have been done with one eye on Hamilton and one eye on the computer screen. Hamilton's prose and Hamilton's quotations are the paraphrased and filleted matter of this book.

The violence men do to others is as nothing to the violence they do to themselves. Lowell used his estranged wife's letters in the poems of *The Dolphin*—a punishment that was no less a punishment of himself

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(though the insensitivity of Caligula is more despicable than the self-mortification of Caliban)—and the ruptures and upheavals of his life found transfigured form in the poetry. That poetry, however undervalued in our age of prose, is the raw and unkempt visage of our late century—the torsions in Lowell, political and personal, have torn further since his death (his books tended to pair into raw and cooked forms of the same formal and expressive tendencies: *Lord Weary's Castle* and *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*; *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*; *Notebook* and the simultaneously issued *History/ For Lizzie and Harriet/ The Dolphin*). This is a minor period for a major poet. Even so, the force and influence of this personality have overwhelmed his biographer. Lowell, after all, plagiarized his own life.

Stingless WASP

Louis Auchincloss
The Collected Stories.
Houghton Mifflin, 465 pages, $24.95

reviewed by Brooke Allen

In A. R. Gurney's play *The Dining Room*, a young man is home from college working on an anthropology project in which he must study and describe a dying culture. His conventional father is startled and disturbed to find out that the dying culture he has chosen to write about is their own: that of country-club WASPs in Buffalo.

If anthropologists a thousand years hence should wish to reconstruct the world of upper-class New Yorkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they could hardly do better than to take the works of Louis Auchincloss as their guide. Auchincloss's writing career has lasted almost fifty years and produced a total of fifty books (which include works of criticism and biography as well as thirty-seven volumes of fiction); now he has made a selection of the short stories he considers his best, published as *The Collected Stories of Louis Auchincloss*. It is an enjoyable but uneven assortment, containing fine stories like "The Wagnerians," "The Stoic," and "The Gemlike Flame" alongside not-so-fine ones like "They That Have Power to Hurt," "Greg's Peg," and "Ares."

Auchincloss is the only writer of his generation to train his sights primarily on the New York aristocracy and so necessarily the last, for by now "old New York" has been reduced to the merest remnants of its former self: the city's current top folks are, to use Auchincloss's own phrase, "rich and visible"—as opposed to those of previous generations, who had money and valued it, God knows, but thought it *mauvais gout* to acknowledge the fact. But though the denizens of Auchincloss's world, barricaded behind the doors of their brownstones and clubs, may seem old-fashioned, more than a little bit quaint and amusing, their neuroses and preoccupations are not irrelevant to our modern selves. For their values, which are of course the Puritan values, have largely formed our culture for better and for worse, and they are pieties to which even the cynical still pay lip-service. Conscience, self-denial, charity. Hard work, of which the measure is financial success. The belief—by the successful—that effort is inevitably rewarded, and that all failure stems from slackness. The sum total, of course, is a society which measures moral worth in material terms, yet believes in an equally fundamental way that all is vanity.

Self-righteousness is unavoidable. The bankers and lawyers who form the backbone of old New York must persuade themselves they are of the elect, not mere moneymakers but the very fabric that holds society together, and that there is above all a *moral* imperative behind the work they do. Thus an upright and serious young man, like Auchincloss's Stoic in the story of that name, can without irony state that "it's my one ambition to become a banker." What a judgment on a culture, that it should foster such ambitions in its elite! Making money is deemed a moral activity, but it is decidedly immoral to flaunt one's money on personal

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adornment or frivolity—though acceptable to use it for the purposes of erecting vast piles of masonry for the benefit of posterity. It is also immoral—a sort of insult to one's ancestors—to spend capital. Charity is, as it should be, an obligation, but it is essential, at least for women, that charity be practiced in a highly visible, active way: as a form of penance, in fact. Simply writing a check won't do the trick. One of Auchincloss's heroines, an elderly widow, is perceptive enough to mock her own plight: "Fund raising," she says, "has swept our world. We dance for cancer; we dine for art; we drink for education." The New York WASP's stance vis-à-vis money is in every way a tortured one.

In the anarchic climate of the late twentieth century, it has become a platitude to point out that these ideals are belied by intractable reality. Auchincloss would aver that this conflict is not a product of contemporary life but is inevitable, inscribed within the contradictions of the Puritan ethos. In one story, "In the Beauty of the Lilies Christ Was Born Across the Sea," a young woman of the 1850s, in an attempt to leave her dry stick of a husband, pleads for understanding from her husband's cousin. "All those books we discussed together, all those poems and plays—what were they really about? *Jane Eyre* and *The Scarlet Letter* and *Madame Bovary*? They were about passion! Do you remember when we went to see Rachel in *Phèdre*?" And the cousin is "sobered by the enormity of her misconstruction"; for he, though more liberal than her husband, is nonetheless a creature of his world, and for him "passion" is a "vulgar word," literature most decidedly not to be taken seriously outside of the parlor.

"God" is another vulgar word here. As the narrator of Auchincloss's novel *The Rector of Justin* observes, "God and man meet only in their Sunday best, and one did not talk about Him, any more than one talked about one's hostess at a party, except in terms of perfunctory respect," and it is an unspoken given that "most fathers would rather see their sons dead than either cultured or devout."

Auchincloss's particular concern is the moments when this moral and aesthetic code is found wanting, the moments when members of this society realize truths beyond what their culture has deemed to be real and earnest. Such moments are dangerous, and those who confront them are faced with a choice: they must either blinker themselves and return to the ethos of the herd, or they must turn their backs on the herd and give up their comfortable place within it.

The artist, or the would-be artist, is inevitably faced with such a decision, and he can only become an artist if he possesses the moral courage to become an outsider. The *Collected Stories* are rich in characters with artistic leanings, but significantly there is only one "real" artist: Eric Stair, the abstract painter who moonlights as a prep-school teacher in "Portrait of the Artist by Another." Stair is able to be a great artist because of his absolute detachment from the values represented by St. Lawrence's School; his foil in the story is his pupil Jamie Abercrombie, who becomes a "boardroom portraitist"—a typical Auchincloss calling, and about the best that can be aspired to by a conformist who fears being cut off from the world of money and influence.

There is only one socially acceptable outlet for an Auchincloss character with artistic leanings, and that is to become a collector. Is it possible for collecting to be an art as well as a vocation? To what extent is a collection a metaphor for a personality? These are questions Auchincloss specifically addressed in the stories that make up the "Memories of an Auctioneer" section of *Tales of Manhattan* (one of which, "The Money Juggler," is included in this volume). It is also the theme of one of the collection's better stories, "The Reckoning." Rosa Kingsland is an appreciator of art, the perfect receptive instrument for the abstract works she buys. As a collector she complements the artist and her gift is so instinctive as almost to qualify as art in its own right. But because in the end she

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sticks by the code of her class, she is compelled to abjure her only real passion and sell off her collection for the benefit of her worthless son.

"The Wagnerians," in my opinion the gem of the collection, deals with much the same theme. Edward Stillman is a rich, dandyish dilettante who unexpectedly finds a vocation when, in 1890, his cousin lands him a job in opera administration. Edward eventually becomes director of the opera and, as a crusading producer intent on introducing Wagner to America, a revolutionary of sorts. As such he comes inevitably into conflict with the opera's patrons, the rich, middlebrow boxholders made up of Edward's own circle and led by his redoubtable mother, the narrator's grandmother. Things come to a head at the New York opening of *Tristan und Isolde*, when the boxholders' incessant chatter during the opera becomes so distracting that Edward is goaded into halting the performance until the talking stops.

"I am sure," says the narrator, "that that was the most terrible moment of Granny's long life." Auchincloss is always at his best when he allows grim humor to get the better of pathos, and he does so wonderfully in this story, with his understanding of the very real horror of social humiliation for a certain generation and social stratum. The upshot of this moment of truth is that Edward Stillman, who like other men of his class is trained to defer to the all-powerful matriarchy, unfailingly makes the wrong decision.

The narrator intuits the real reason for the boxholders' stubborn chatter.

> I remember thinking that it was ironical that Granny and Aunt Rosalie's world should be most bored when Wagner was speaking most directly to them. For Mark sings of the day, which in *Tristan* is always compared unfavorably to the night. The day is reality: it is harsh and bright and garish. It is full of things that boxholders like to talk about: honor, loyalty, ties of blood. But the night, which to the lovers has become the only truth, is dark and lush and sleep-inducing. The night is death and love.

All of this leads to Auchincloss's own weakness: his unwillingness, like that of so many of his characters, to be a professional artist. For in spite of the fact that he is a fantastically prolific author (a good WASP works hard when he really sets his mind to something), Auchincloss has spent some forty-five years as a lawyer, and has practiced trusts and estates law at the firm of Hawkins, Delafield & Wood since 1954. He has long been comfortable with the simultaneous identities of lawyer and writer, but his ease was hard won: the two professions seemed contradictory in his youth, and he left the law for several years in the early Fifties to be a full-time writer, a move which he found so stressful that he underwent psychoanalysis in order to reconcile the two aspects of his character, the "male" side that loved the law and the "female" side that was drawn to the arts.

Auchincloss's idol is Henry James, whose leadership as a short-story writer he claims to follow. Such a claim invites unfair comparisons, unfair because James was a genius, of a sort, and Auchincloss is not. But Auchincloss's artistic relation to James is not simply a matter of talent. James was willing to detach himself from his caste and become an outsider; Auchincloss has been reluctant to do so.

Whether from insufficient sense of vocation or as a result of his extremely high output, Auchincloss is prone to a very un-Jamesian carelessness. Structure and storytelling devices are often primitive, more reminiscent of O. Henry and John Buchan than of the more subtle masters Auchincloss admires. Dialogue tends to be colorless, with one character's speech indistinguishable from another's: Auchincloss's wonderful sensitivity to the nuances of behavior does not extend to an ear for the nuances of speech. Sometimes the talk is downright bad, as in this passage from "The Stoic":

> "Well, if that isn't the limit! Splashing about in the dirty puddle of your mother's dishonor! Honestly, George, I never thought even you'd be such a creep."

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> "Can the big talk. What are you doing but sitting on your backside in that same puddle until some fool of a guy is crazy enough to pick you out of it?"
>
> . . . "You crummy little bastard!" she almost shrieked.

The truth is that, as each of these stories in its own way indicates, Auchincloss is a little in love with his own milieu. He is not a traitor to his class, as some have claimed; he is an astute and observant but finally affectionate member of it. The fact that it is dying only deepens his affection, and his warmth toward his subject has an unfortunate tendency to turn to sentiment. Perhaps his fatal flaw is simply that he is too clearly a good and humane man who lacks the requisite ruthlessness of the major artist.

This was New York?

Eric Homberger
Scenes from the Life of a City:
Corruption and Conscience
in Old New York.
Yale University Press, 358 pages, $28.50

reviewed by Francis Morrone

A history of the conception and development of New York's Central Park that does not mention Claude Lorrain, Wordsworth, William Kent, or Capability Brown—that is to say, the figures behind some of the wide-ranging currents of thought and feeling that informed the aesthetic decisions made by Olmsted and Vaux, the park's creators—represents, however scrupulous the scholar's attention to primary documents, a failure of sympathetic imagination. Into the vacuum that inevitably results from such a lack of imagination, it is nowadays fashionable for the scholar to obtrude a mentality that is *au courant*, and usually politically correct. Such is the case with Professor Eric Homberger, whose new book about corruption and conscience in antebellum New York is both pedantic in its accretion of documentary minutiae and so lacking in sympathetic imagination that it is, in the end, little more than a heap of facts spiced with P.C. platitudes. What's more, it's history written from the standpoint of hubris. To wit: nineteenth-century commentators "viewed such things" as rapid urbanization and "the perceived breakdown of values" that accompanied it "without the benefit of our sociological and political wisdom." These poor souls' "premodern" ideal was a community that "was, above all, orderly, in which citizens accepted responsibility for themselves and for the civic order." When statements like these occur in the introduction, the reader knows he's in for a long ride.

Given these fundamental defects, it is well to point out that Professor Homberger's book is not without its virtues. His prose, though lacking grace, has clarity and pace. He moves conscientiously and competently through his primary sources, and the political attitudinizing, though annoying, neither tends to force conclusions nor dominates so thoroughly as we're lately accustomed to in academic writing. The book can be easily and enjoyably read for the information it contains. Homberger deals with four broad subjects, each of which he feels reflects the struggle for community in the antebellum city: various efforts at ameliorating the effects of poverty and unsanitary physical conditions in the city; the career of the city's leading abortionist; the career of Tammany operator "Slippery Dick" Connolly, a paragon of political corruption; and the creation of Central Park.

Only one chapter positively bridles: that on Caroline Somers, the notorious abortionist known as Madame Restell. Madame Restell has become a kind of cult figure in certain quarters. Though she promoted herself fraudulently, and though even her champions admit she wreaked untold pain and suffering on hundreds of young women, she and her entire field of endeavor have been lately imbued with the kind of sanctity historical commentators once reserved for the likes of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. Homberger's account of

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Madame Restell is factually accurate and reads compellingly. What bridles is his utterly unquestioned assumption that anyone who reads his book will agree with him that the criminalization of abortion was a "harshly repressive public policy." Mind you, he does not argue that this is so—he just baldly states it, and assumes that his readers assume it to be so. He refuses to recognize that this is an issue that is far from settled in all his readers' minds. Homberger does not deny Madame Restell's chicanery, but excuses it because it served a higher good. Anti-abortion laws were "a potent symbol of the anxieties society had been expressing about female sexuality, and of the claims for equality and suffrage which a significant minority of women were making for their sex." "The ineffective abortion laws of the 1840s were . . . a police action in the ongoing war over sexuality as American prudery and puritanism experienced the multiple strains of rapid social change." "Abortion symbolized the deepening anxiety some Americans felt at the decay of the secure patriarchal and social construction of reality." (Homberger even includes the obligatory systematic misrepresentation of Roman Catholic views on abortion as expressed in Pius IX's 1869 bull *Apostolicae Sedis*, which, whatever left-wing academics wish to believe to the contrary, did not reverse centuries of Catholic teaching on abortion.) One need not be a right-to-lifer to be repulsed by Homberger's posturings. Still, consonant with the virtues of the rest of the book, the chapter on Madame Restell, whatever its moral repugnancy, is exceptionally informative and readable.

As my own special interest is in the topographical development of cities, I was particularly interested in what Professor Homberger had to say about Central Park. I believe Central Park to be one of the most glorious artifacts ever to spring from the American imagination. Homberger, too, quite approves of the thing. This is, given the P.C. biases on display throughout the book, a tad surprising: the fashion today is to deride Central Park as having been inspired by property speculators and as having displaced an indigenous population of poor squatters. (The park also wiped out the local population of muskrats, but this, thankfully, goes unmentioned by Homberger.) It seems almost enough that Homberger thinks that in the end Central Park embodied more good than evil. His narrative of the conception and development of the park is excellent in its chronology and identification of source documents, and particularly in its generous quotations from Olmsted's still vastly under-read writings.

My problem with Professor Homberger's account is that it evinces not the least sense of the *aesthetic* dimension of Olmsted and Vaux's creation. The unwillingness or inability to recognize the autonomy, hence the value, of the aesthetic is part and parcel of the general failure of imagination I noted earlier. Increasingly in the field of urban history everything is subsumed under social categories—"our sociological and political wisdom." That the beautiful, conceived as an end in itself, is good, and what's more constitutive of a good society, is utterly incomprehensible in the present climate. Yet this is exactly what Olmsted and Vaux held to be self-evidently true, and this, for anyone with eyes to see, is what Central Park self-evidently is. In the period about which Homberger writes, various moral and social claims were often appended to the aesthetic, as in Ruskin (another name unmentioned in the book). But in our own time, the aesthetic has, in academic discourse at least, been obliterated. In the major civic improvements that are part of the glorious legacy of the nineteenth-century, there were indeed economic and political motives aplenty. But there were independent aesthetic motives as well: leading thinkers and artists of the period extolled the benefits of civic beauty. They did not—or at least most of them did not—*conflate* the aesthetic and the moral (as Pugin perhaps did, and as Ruskin is often incorrectly accused of having done). Rather, in conceiving of the aesthetic as a necessary if not sufficient constitutive

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element of a civil society capable of producing civilized men, the aesthetic was seen as fulfilling a moral purpose. The thoroughgoing conflation of the aesthetic and the moral is what gave us the arid cityscapes of the twentieth century—as well as what gives us the arid scholarship that assumes the aesthetic to be merely a part of a superstructure expressive of the dynamic interplay among social classes in an economically volatile society (or something like that). The academic hubris lies in the failure to acknowledge that Frederick Law Olmsted might have had a great deal more to teach us than we, for all our "sociological and political wisdom," have to teach him.

As for Homberger's stated purpose of exploring attempts to infuse an increasingly diverse immigrant metropolis with a sense of community, he fails to note, even in passing, the arenas in which a true and vibrant sense of community was forming—spontaneously, and driven by the free market. The historian Gunther Barth, in his magisterial book *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (1980), cites five products of the marketplace as the principal generators of a sense of community in an otherwise supremely fluid urban society: the apartment house; the spectator sport of professional baseball; the department store; the metropolitan press; and vaudeville. That the marketplace provided these means to community points to another, overwhelming, aspect of the nineteenth-century American city that goes virtually unremarked, as though flushed down the memory hole, by urban historians today: the poor groups that populated antebellum New York largely succeeded within a generation or two to prosper materially, not excluding the hoveled hordes of Five Points.

The whole academic industry that takes as its starting point the war of the classes in nineteenth-century New York is grounded in fantasy. There were, indeed, poverty, disease, squalor aplenty in nineteenth-century New York. Yet that same city responded not only by creating Central Park and effecting remarkable sanitary reforms, but by allowing the wheels of commerce to pull millions from poverty. The real New York of the nineteenth century was both a spectacular material artifact and a well nigh unprecedented engine of the material improvement of immemorially poor peoples. The nineteenth-century New York of today's academia—including, alas, Eric Homberger—is largely a tawdry fiction.

Gentleman composer

Howard Pollack
Skyscraper Lullaby: The Life and Music of John Alden Carpenter.
Smithsonian Institution Press, 511 pages, $59

reviewed by Terry Teachout

No grave is as deep as that of the once-popular composer whose works go unheard after his death. Seventy years ago, John Alden Carpenter (1876–1951) was widely regarded as one of this country's leading composers; today, he is little more than a footnote in the more thorough histories of American music. Had he been a woman or a member of a protected minority group, Carpenter would doubtless now be the subject of a full-scale revaluation, complete with foundation-subsidized recording sessions. But his middle name tells the story: not only was John Alden Carpenter a man, he was a wealthy scion of the sort of family that used to be called "distinguished." (He was descended from John and Priscilla Alden through his paternal great-grandmother.) There is precious little love lost in the world of grantsmanship for such privileged folk. Thus the embarrassingly derivative music of Amy Beach is exhumed for the delectation of earnest feminists, while Carpenter's far more individual scores are allowed to quietly gather library dust.

The decline and fall of John Alden Carpenter's reputation began long before his death. He was a member of the older generation of American composers that got

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lost in the shuffle of excitement caused by the return from France of Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson and the subsequent establishment of a school of homegrown musical modernists. One might well call these men, the most notable of whom were Carpenter and Charles Griffes, the American Edwardians. Many of them had European training; a few, Carpenter among them, were influenced by American popular music; the best won enthusiastic recognition from the performers, publishers, and critics of their day. Yet all had fallen into disrepute by midcentury, and Carpenter fell furthest of all, as Howard Pollack explains in *Skyscraper Lullaby: The Life and Music of John Alden Carpenter*:

> The most acclaimed musicians performed his works regularly, including conductors of the stature of Walter Damrosch, Karl Muck, Frederick Stock, Leopold Stokowski, Serge Koussevitzky, Fritz Reiner, Artur Rodzinski, Fritz Busch, Pierre Monteux, Otto Klemperer, Bruno Walter, Eugene Ormandy, and Werner Janssen. Such legendary singers as Alma Gluck, John McCormack, Louise Homer, Ernestine Schumann-Heink, Maggie Teyte, Kirsten Flagstad, Conchita Supervia, Rose Bampton, Mina Hager, and Eleanor Steber sang his songs. Percy Grainger championed for decades Carpenter's Piano Concertino, and the Rosé, Budapest, and Pro Arte Quartets played the composer's String Quartet. The Chicago Opera and Metropolitan Opera mounted his ballets, one of which had been commissioned (though never produced) by Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes—a singular honor for an American composer.

This passage exaggerates only slightly the extent of Carpenter's fame. As late as the Forties, he was still earning more than $6,000 a year in royalties, the equivalent of about $26,000 in 1994 dollars. (The figure, Pollack points out, would have been significantly higher in the Twenties, when performances of his music were more frequent.) To get from there to obscurity in the space of a decade is hardly unprecedented in the history of music—much the same thing happened, for instance, to Meyerbeer and Franz Schreker—and such composers are usually found on closer scrutiny to have been victims of what scientists call a "paradigm shift." In Carpenter's case, the new paradigm was modernism, the rise of which led American artists of the Thirties and Forties to reject out of hand the fruits of the "genteel tradition," be they the books of Paul Elmer More or the ballets of John Alden Carpenter.

For the modernists, the only American Edwardian worth salvaging was Charles Ives, Carpenter's near-exact contemporary (they were two classes apart at Harvard), whose rough-hewn blend of vernacular borrowings and experimental techniques was viewed with favor by Copland and his colleagues. Even though Ives led a life of upper-middle-class comfort, he somehow managed to escape the stigma of wealth that led many critics to take Carpenter less seriously than was his due. Writing in 1942 of a performance by Bruno Walter and the New York Philharmonic of Carpenter's Second Symphony, Virgil Thomson called the work "rich man's music, gentleman's composition." Like so many of Thomson's cattier tags, this one stuck, and discouraged younger musicians from looking into Carpenter's music.

In asserting that Carpenter "deserves comparison with such contemporaries as Ravel, Holst, de Falla, and Janáček," Howard Pollack is therefore going squarely against the received view of premodern American musical history. It seems to me unlikely that he will win many converts, partly because his book is somewhat pedestrian in tone (it reads like a thesis) and partly because the job is too hard for a mere book to accomplish: I find it difficult to imagine anyone purchasing a copy of *Skyscraper Lullaby* who wasn't already interested in its subject. Still, Pollack gives it his best shot, aided by unrestricted access to Carpenter's private papers, and the result is a surprisingly palatable biography that sheds welcome light on the insufficiently-studied world of twentieth-

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century American music before Copland.

Pollack's lengthy analyses of Carpenter's compositions will necessarily be of little value to readers without access to either scores or recordings of the works in question. Fortunately, these can be skipped without loss to the narrative, which supplies a clear historical context for Carpenter's life and music; Pollack is especially good on music in Chicago, Carpenter's lifelong home and a hotbed of modern-music activity during the early decades of this century. There is even a piquant whiff of scandal: Carpenter had a mistress during the last twenty years of his first marriage, a dabbler in theosophy and Moral Re-Armament named Ellen Borden (she was Adlai Stevenson's mother-in-law), and their correspondence, which now reposes in the Library of Congress, is quoted extensively.

By far the most interesting thing about John Alden Carpenter, though, is not his private life but his career. Thomson's crack about "rich man's music" notwithstanding, one of the striking aspects of Carpenter's musical career is the fact that it does not appear to have been eased to any great degree by his money. Like Charles Ives, he spent the whole of his composing life holding down a day job (he was vice president of the family business, a cordage company, from 1909 to 1936). Unlike Ives, he seems never to have subsidized performances of his music; musicians took it up simply because they liked it. Between 1914 and 1936, after which he mostly gave up composing, Carpenter never found it difficult to place new pieces—most of his orchestral music, for example, was played either by Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony or by Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony—and his reviews, if not invariably favorable, were almost always respectful.

Yet Carpenter was by no means conservative in his musical language, at least by the standards of his generation. He was one of the first American composers to be influenced by Debussy and Stravinsky, and one of the first classical composers anywhere to incorporate elements of jazz into his music. His witty Piano Concertino, composed two years before the first jazz recordings were released in 1917 by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, contains unmistakable suggestions of jazz, and his two most successful ballet scores, *Krazy Kat: A Jazz Pantomime* (1921) and *Skyscrapers: A Ballet of Modern American Life* (1923–24), are sprinkled with jazz-derived rhythms, harmonies, and instrumental colors.

Carpenter's interest in jazz was wholly characteristic. Throughout his life, he remained receptive to a range of music unusually wide for an American of his time, place, and class. Speaking to a Boston reporter in 1932, he named Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, and Irving Berlin as "important and interesting composers" alongside Ravel, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Hindemith, and his 1947 comments about musical comedy are astonishingly forward-looking for a man born in the same year that *Siegfried* and the Brahms C-Minor Symphony received their premières:

> Americans have little interest in opera; it is not their dish. But we will get the American equivalent of opera from Broadway. . . . Men like Richard Rodgers will give us something to be proud of. Just lift *Oklahoma!* two or three notches, eliminate a few of its crudities, and you have a native dignified art that you don't need to keep alive with a pulmotor like the Metropolitan Opera.

All this was of a piece with an overall curiosity about vernacular culture scarcely less surprising in a gentleman composer. Carpenter set verses by American poets ranging from Vachel Lindsay to Langston Hughes, and *Krazy Kat*, based on George Herriman's comic strip, was only the first of his ventures into proto-pop art: had Walt Disney produced his planned sequel to *Fantasia*, Carpenter's *Adventures in a Perambulator* (1914) would have been one of the pieces heard on the soundtrack. (This sequence actually made it to the storyboard stage before Disney abandoned the project in 1941.)

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The danger of being a good appreciator is that it can lead to a faceless eclecticism. This was a trap into which Carpenter never fell: from *Adventures in a Perambulator* onward, his music was distinctively personal in style. It is easy enough to see why that style, agreeable though it was, failed to appeal to younger composers. The "fundamental vigor and austerity" Carpenter admired in Stravinsky's *Les Noces* are missing from his own work, which is fastidious to a fault (though there is nothing "gentlemanly" about his polished craftsmanship) and which Virgil Thomson savaged with pale praise: "The whole [of the Second Symphony] is opulent and comfortable, intelligent, well organized, cultured and firm without being either ostentatious or unduly modest."

This criticism, if unfair, is nonetheless intelligible. For all his interest in modernism, Carpenter remained to the end a child of the genteel tradition, and it is no surprise to find him confessing late in life that "Samuel Barber exemplifies my own line of musical thinking," a sentence that might have been penned by the late George Apley. But the absence of vigor is not incompatible with the presence of genuine sweetness and charm, a fact Percy Grainger recognized when he wrote: "John Alden Carpenter's works are typical of American music at its best, and, almost overpunctilious as they are in the cleanliness and refinement of their craftsmanship, they show those sharply contrasted moods of wistfulness and sparkling buoyancy that so often delight us in the arts of the New World."

Grainger, though a lunatic, was no fool ("overpunctilious" is exactly right), and comments like his are bound to make readers of *Skyscraper Lullaby* eager to hear more of John Alden Carpenter's music. This, sad to say, is a wish that cannot easily be gratified: although quite a bit of Carpenter's music has been recorded over the years, very little is now in print. [1] But the handful of performances currently available on CD is representative, and leaves no doubt of what Howard Pollack is getting at when, comparing Ives and Carpenter in his afterword, he writes: "Ives wanted music like a small-town marching band, a revival meeting, a barn dance; Carpenter wanted music like a comic strip, a motion picture, a skyscraper. . . . Both embodied the promise and early fulfillment of an art music that, at home and abroad, was recognizably American."

Prodigiously human

Graham Robb Balzac: A Life.
Norton, 521 pages, $35

reviewed by Daniel J. Silver

By the 1840s, Honoré de Balzac was not just a famous novelist but a world-famous celebrity, portrayed and caricatured so often that he could be spotted during his European travels even by the barely educated. He was also known to be up to his eyes in debt; as a world-class deadbeat, Balzac was never more than two steps ahead of his creditors. Would that he had been able to collect on the debt of influence which so many writers and intellectuals were eager to share in after his death. Zola, of course, wasted little time in claiming Balzac, the jaunty realist, as a key progenitor of naturalism; so, too, Marx and Engels ignored Balzac's petit-bourgeois Catholic Royalism to stake their claim on

1 *Adventures in a Perambulator* is included in a collection of American program music performed by Howard Hanson and the Eastman-Rochester Orchestra (Mercury 434 319-2MM); *Krazy Kat* is included in a collection of jazz-influenced American music performed by Calvin Simmons and the Los Angeles Philharmonic (New World 80228-2). Carpenter's music for solo piano has been recorded by Denver Oldham (New World NW 328/329-2). None of the many excellent 78-era recordings of music by Carpenter is available on CD, except for a wonderfully vivid 1932 performance by Conchita Supervia and Ivor Newton of "When I Bring to You Colour'd Toys," an excerpt from *Gitanjali*, Carpenter's heavily perfumed 1913 song cycle on poems by Rabindranath Tagore (Pearl GEMM CD 9969).

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him as a prescient critic of a budding capitalist society.

Given Balzac's often indelicate attachment to brute fact, these particular *hommages* make a kind of ready sense, which is not the case with the tributes offered by Henry James, Gustave Flaubert, and Marcel Proust —novelists whose aesthetic affinity with the stout realist is less than obvious. And yet these masters of mandarin delicacy, subtle suggestiveness, and stylistic precision were singularly stirred by Balzac. Though Flaubert had said, in a typically wicked *mot*, that Balzac would have been a truly great man if only he had known how to write, there was no doubt he appreciated Balzac's breadth of accomplishment; even this perfectionist, who could dawdle for days over a sentence, was not long able to turn up his nose at Balzac's "industrial" literary production—as the critic Sainte-Beuve had scoffed—especially when the intensity of realization that Balzac brought to his scenes so rarely flagged.

In the first of several remarkable essays he was to write on his distant literary cousin, James pays tribute to Balzac's ambition to depict the whole social world in all its complexity:

> [A]fter the vividness of his imagination, Balzac's strongest side is his grasp of actual facts. Behind our contemporary civilization is an immense and complicated machinery—the machinery of government, of police, of the arts, the professions, the trades. Among these things Balzac moved easily and joyously; they form the rough skeleton of his great edifice.

Though we may note that it is among these things that James the novelist scarcely moved at all, we must still reckon with his appreciation for the grandeur of Balzac's *projet*. James in his cultivation of the nuances of consciousness may have found relief in clinging to Balzac's adored objects, the very stones that pave the streets of his realist imagination. The Balzacian novel is characterized by an immense breadth of *surface*: not just in the lovingly rendered details of everyday reality but in the constant, insinuating presence of a narrative voice that cannot refrain from telling us everything his characters think, and even at times what we should think of them.

The sententious rationality of the Balzacian narrator was not echoed, however, in his life, as Balzac the man was stranger and more extravagant than any of his characters. This is what we learn from Graham Robb's admirable life of Balzac, the first full-scale biography in English in over sixty years. And it must be acknowledged that Balzac poses great difficulties for the biographer. Consider the sheer scale of the effort: Balzac was inarguably the most prolific novelist to whom we can safely ascribe greatness; the grand compendium of fictions, *La Comédie Humaine*, just part of his vast writings in all genres, by itself contains almost a hundred novels. Robb assures us in the preface that over the years he has *twice* toured the entire Balzacian *oeuvre*—and surely there are precious few with the command to put his assertion to the test. But it is still a terrific challenge to synthesize this mass of data in a way that seems at once succinct enough to form a compelling narrative and yet free and open enough to escape the tendentiousness that afflicts so many modern biographies.

Robb does not really try for the grand synthesis, and that is just as well. Readers seeking here the secret that will enshrine *the* idea of Balzac in some final form will be disappointed. Robb's book has a loose feel to it, but it seems appropriate. Like the monk's robe which Balzac famously donned during his writing jags, this biography suits its subject, but does not bind it. It is a plausibly empirical record of an often outrageous and incredible life.

Balzac was born in the provincial town of Tours in 1799. His father was himself an extraordinary figure, whose life encompassed a transformation "from peasant into Frenchman," to paraphrase the historian Eugen Weber. He went from tilling the earth to being a respectable petit-bourgeois townsman. In his will to remake himself, Balzac's father became a fierce autodidact and emu-

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lated the learned with his own treatises, including one on the power of will. Even though the son was afforded a respectable bourgeois education, denied to his low-born father, Balzac *fils* not only repeated this streak of obstinacy, but supplemented the regular curriculum—with which he showed little patience—with his own kind of crank learning, even to the touch of mimicking his father's crackpot obsessions: he later turned out his own treatise on the will.

His mother had ambitions as well, though confined to the domestic sphere. Madame Balzac would have made a good model for Madame Bovary. Much younger than her husband, who provided a cover of provincial respectability, Balzac's mother longed for "independence." That is to say she had a number of affairs. Her son, gifted and cursed with precocious powers of vision, saw it all, and harbored resentment toward his mother. In his own love affairs with several older society women, he was looking for a combination of worldly sexuality and the simple mother-love of which he felt deprived by Madame Balzac's amorous distractions.

At school in Vendôme, Balzac exhibited a curious doubleness of temperament which was to characterize him for the rest of his life. Surviving reports tell of a garrulous boy who could hold court at will, but who was also given to a kind of melancholy and a spirit of rebellion. More than a few times he was sentenced to the school's version of solitary confinement, a cruel fate for most; but for young Balzac this was a chance to exercise his vibrant imagination, already filled with the romances he read instead of the assigned texts. If he missed the regular lessons, he experienced *avant la lettre* the life of the garret to which he thought himself fated as he became aware of a lurking ambition to write.

This garret was to be made literal as he went off to Paris as a young man bent on fulfilling fantasies of glory and fame, and rented a perfectly awful, drab flat that was to serve in its poverty as an earnest of his high seriousness. But Balzac could never remain too serious for long, nor could he ignore material needs. The novelist who was to chronicle more intently than any other the lure of money and the difference it makes in every aspect of our earthly fortunes had learned his lessons early on.

In short, he did not hesitate to sell out. Long before he attempted the first of his "serious" novels, Balzac hammered away at potboilers—mainly pseudo-gothic romances, excuses to serve up gory grand guignol that would sell. Like today's marketing wizards, Balzac created his own publicity campaign for his works, complete with rave reviews he wrote himself. This was only the beginning of a panoply of publicity techniques that in their daring and gall outrival current commercialism. When Sainte-Beuve tried to deflate his reputation later on by revealing that Balzac was the true author of some dreadful pseudonymous works, Balzac turned this coup to his advantage; Balzac had long recognized that there was no such thing as bad publicity, and indeed, he fed off his enemies, and only felt morose when his name was not bandied about for good or ill.

Balzac in his youth was hardly daunted by failure, nor did he suffer deep remorse for the many compromises demanded by worldly success. It appears that he had a remarkable confidence in his ultimate destiny. Acting the part of "genius" was as good a start as any toward achieving the goal. Robb captures Balzac's pre-emptive idea of success in a splendid passage, characteristically full of droll but lightly applied irony:

> Paris was the perfect setting for the attempt [at fame], a place where the bourgeoisie could now acquire high status and where appearances were not the opposite of reality but its precursors. When they begin to circulate in the great city, usually in the early years of the Second Restoration (after Waterloo), the ambitious young heroes of *La Comédie Humaine* quickly realize that they can best attain their goals by appearing to have achieved them already. Shiny leather boots, glamorous waistcoats, ties of the proper color for the time of

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day, they discover, can open any door. A more subtle and desperate device involves the use of a toothpick: a starving man who saunters along the boulevard picking at his teeth stands a better chance of being invited out for a meal than a man who begs for food. Balzac later found that financiers referred to this sort of display as "creating confidence."

Not content with making money through pursuing the literary muse, Balzac tried his hand at various entrepreneurial schemes. All his efforts failed, but not because he was necessarily a bad businessman—for he apparently had some clever ideas with which others were to succeed later on—but because of sheer bad luck. Yet as his debts continued to pile up, even after he had become a famous writer, the allure of get-rich-quick schemes was never far off. Robb unearths an account of a bizarre expedition Balzac took in the late 1830s—which is to say after he had become "Balzac"—in which he searched for silver mines in hitherto unexplored Sardinia.

Inadequate as a means of gaining true wealth, writing was nonetheless the métier to which Balzac inevitably returned. He began to take on a new seriousness in 1829 with the publication of *The Chouans*, an account of the true story of a futile guerrilla action fought against the Republicans by Royalist "Whites." With this mixture of historical fiction and romantic interest, Balzac finally entered the ranks of serious writers; he was later, unsurprisingly, to try to pass it off as his "first" novel, and it would be the first of the works he would dignify with a position in his Human Comedy—the grand edifice that was not to be conceived for another decade.

Fame arrived at last with *La Peau de Chagrin* (*The Wild Ass's Skin*), for which he had already seeded interest before publication with a series of articles planted in newspapers trumpeting the forthcoming work—again, anticipating the modern PR flack by at least a century. This novel was the first to introduce his fascination with mysticism and the occult—a lifelong theme that sorted easily for him with his realism—but probably owed its notoriety to its general air of bohemian dissolution. The novel was lavishly praised and roundly condemned, but at least the cruel world of public opinion was never again to remain indifferent to the name of Balzac.

Naturally, with fame came perks: the most notable for a parvenu provincial bourgeois of that time was entrée to the higher social world, that aristocratic domain of the Faubourg St. Germain. Balzac was to become a mobile fixture, as it were, in the salons of the great and near-great—writers having come to enjoy peculiar access to social status otherwise denied them by birth and relative poverty. He was also to prove an excellent sponge off his noble patrons, which only encouraged the growth of his debt. He even began to sport the aristocratic particle, "de," in his name, but not so much to pass as part of a noble family as to flaunt his artistic license of self-creation. As his fame grew, Balzac again marketed his image: one particular extravagance was a custom-made walking stick that became a personal trademark.

His greatest triumphs among the upper classes were with women. Never much to look at, he had the gift of gab and the power to lend a lapidary gloss to reality through his art—very potent attractions in their own way, especially to relieve the fashionable boredom of the *haut monde*. Female admirers from afar would write to him proposing intellectual liaisons. It was by virtue of such epistolary admiration, through a kind of "personal ad" as we would call it today, that Balzac was to meet his greatest love, the woman he would eventually marry seventeen years later, shortly before his death.

Eveline Hanska was the heiress of a proud old Polish family who had made a financially sound match with a Russian count, who was nonetheless, in Bovaresque tradition, dull and inattentive. Madame Hanska longed for serious culture and much else. After a long correspondence—the beginning of what Robb calls Balzac's greatest "novel"—they

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met in Switzerland and she proved lovely, and he was soon to find that she was astonishingly wealthy. The Hanska estate in the Ukraine was like a small country compared to the paltry mansions of the Parisian elite. As luck would have it, the count obligingly died, leaving open the prospect of marriage.

But the hypothetical marriage was stalled by Balzac's writing, his efforts to escape from ever-growing debt, and her suspicions about his fidelity. Eveline had good reason for her doubts. His dalliances stemmed probably not so much from lust as from easy access to opportunities—partly, of course, through prolonged separation, but also from a kind of mania to which he was given much of his life. This mania could take many forms—the grandiosity of ideas sexual, artistic, and commercial.

Two grand ideas shaped his aspirations into the 1840s: his Comedy and marriage to Eveline. As usual with Balzac, his motivations for devising the idea of a great fictional architecture are not easy to sort out, compounded as they are of aesthetic insight, entrepreneurial ambition, and monomania. The insight was the idea of creating a self-contained yet organically interdependent fictional world, where each novel could feed off the interest promoted by the others. Balzac devised the corollary notion of recurring characters, and there are more than five hundred characters who repeat themselves among the two thousand that thread through the Comedy. In turn, the building of interest among readers through this interlocking web of connections among the novels could very well lead to fantastic sales—or so he hoped. The monomania was nothing less than the ambition to maintain the whole world in his brain, as he put it in a letter to Eveline—and thus enter the honor roll of history as a grand figure alongside Napoleon.

Yet all of the scheming, writing, and fleeing from creditors left Balzac little time or energy to enjoy life, although he was among the most extraordinarily vital of men. Balzac was to have one short period of

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happiness in the late 1840s, when he had achieved a new popularity—seeing three of his novels at once running serially in Parisian papers—and the imminence of marriage felt surer than ever before. But, alas, every trouble that had ever haunted him returned with a vengeance—his troubled relations with his mother, a loss of energy following his frightful labors, and his continuing debts. And a lurking unease about his health was to be horribly confirmed with a precipitous decline in his spirits and bodily powers just after the 1848 Revolution.

Balzac died—in 1850, when he was fifty-one years old—in a state of complete, humiliating physical breakdown. He had finally married, but it appears the loyal Eveline agreed out of pity rather than prudence. He maintained, nonetheless, good cheer as long as he had the power to speak, and this testifies to his essential vitality and, yes, to return to his old obsession, will power.

In keeping with his spirit of negative capability, Robb does not offer a final assessment of Balzac as a writer, though he usefully summarizes, in an appendix, the received traditions of critical commentary. Balzac was barely in the ground before the haggling began over his true legacy: was he a Romantic or a Realist, naturalist or visionary, materialist or spiritualist?

To repair to an old-fashioned category, we might say that Balzac was above all else an extraordinary storyteller, the greatest since Shakespeare. And to invoke this notion is also to bring in the associated idea of a diverse community of appreciation. Notwithstanding the cynicism and infighting that characterized the world Balzac depicted, his readership—divided along all possible lines—understood his works as a lingua franca for his age, a common point of reference. He lived through a period of unprecedented social and political fragmentation, but Balzac managed to fill the gaps and fissures with the interstitial network of his Human Comedy.

It is only with a sobering sense of irony that we can view the contrast represented by our current situation: there has never been a time in the West of such comprehensively shared agreement on the fundamentals of a polity—which is to say liberal democracy—and yet in our universities are promoted fashionable doctrines of multiculturalist "diversity" that have only led to a divisive idea of culture. If another genius like Balzac, with a capacious vision of the social world, high and low, were to emerge, it is likely he would at best be branded a fey antiquarian. It is good that Robb's fine biography sends us back to Balzac's wonderful novels with fresh inspiration, but it is hard to read them now without a bitter taste for what we have lost.

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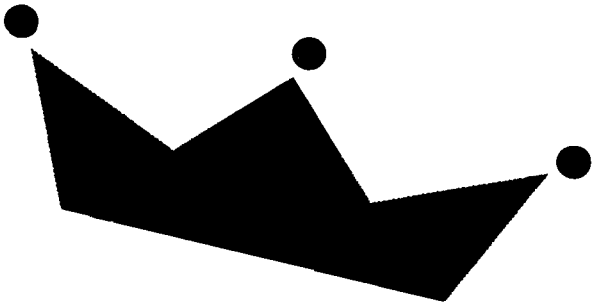

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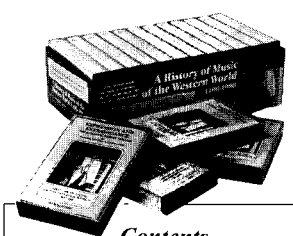

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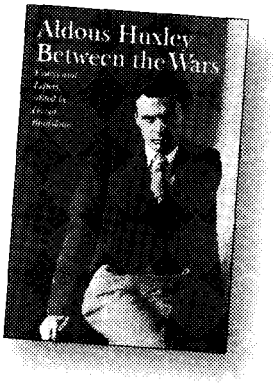

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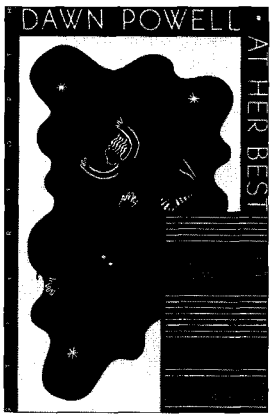

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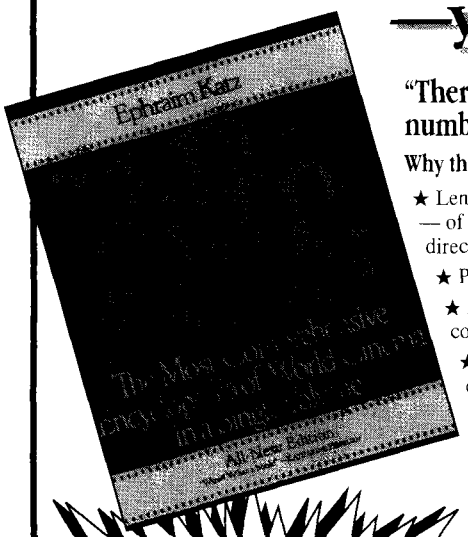

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